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Paradise Valley

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed in the text, or has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate

Date: 5/02/2010

Paradise Valley

By Suzy Bell

Chapter 1

My mother died when there was no rain. We were having a terrible drought and everything in the garden turned brown. There were severe water restrictions so we couldn't water the plants; even the swimming pool was empty. Her death altered my world and changed the way I felt about things forever. I was so traumatised I didn't go to school for six months, I didn't walk for three months, I just lay in bed paralysed with grief.

'Grief is a beast of a thing,' said my father. 'It can cloak you for years and just when you think you're about to shake it off, it returns.' It sure does, it returns with innocuous things like the fleeting sight of a familiar pattern on a piece of cloth, or a long-forgotten scent. I once sat on a bus next to a lady with a pink bag decorated with red roses. It was the same pattern and colour as one of my mother's favourite cotton summer dresses. I leapt off that bus at the next stop, my fourteen-year-old face wet with tears.

I live in a city surrounded by running fields of sugar cane, where twilight is filled with the shrieks of hadedas and high up on the Berea along Essenwood Road you'll hear the deafening screeching chorus of a thousand Indian mynahs in giant Natal mahogany trees. In Durban the sun is always shining, there is no such thing as winter. Now it is autumn, but you wouldn't know this by looking at the colour of the leaves on the Flamboyant trees. In the tropics, even when the trees are from Madagascar, the leaves don't fall or change colour with seasons.

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And when it rains, the soft drops offer great relief because it gets so hot you want to peel off your clothes and get naked. It doesn't help if you have a swimming pool. A dip in a pool during peak summer is like swimming in thick soup. When it gets really hot, at about thirty-eight or forty degrees, you sweat so much your clothes stick to you like cling film. Everything sweats, even the plants, and especially the giant Delicious Monsters that resemble elephant's ears and flourish wildly at the bottom of everyone's garden.

Thankfully the rains are returning. Durban is now lush with jungles of trees – mango, paw-paw, banana, wild fig, avocado and litchi. There are Hawaiian-pink skirted hibiscus flowers, blue plumbago, brilliant orange strelizias, and masses and masses of tumbling sun-loving bougainvillea the colour of a thousand ripe pomegranates. There are fever trees that, my mom used to joke, 'wear pistachio stockings without heels', there are flouncy red bottle brush trees that attract the honey bees, there are Redwinged starlings that nest in Queen palms, bristling Cycads that bristle for the sake of bristling, and every day the frangipani drop their fragrant white-with-a dab-of-lemon flowers in our street. There are Paradise flycatchers, vervet monkeys, Yellow-Crested weavers, Bee-eaters, Loeries, Red Bishops, woodpeckers, owls, Fork-Tailed Drongos, Red-Collared Barbets, rat-catchers, tea makers, leatherback turtles, flower sellers, Zionists, colonialists, herbalists, Hindus, bottlenose dolphins, tsotsis, pigeon-shit-stained Queen Elizabeth statues, visiting swallows, immigrating Chinese, iscathamiya dancers, gospel singers, mosques, cathedrals, Shembe white stone churches in open fields next door to McDonalds, impepo-scented buses, shad fishermen, strings of orange marigolds protecting archways, tailors shoulder-hunched over sewing machines in square grey windows, green curry leaves in a red bowl in Mrs Chetty's kitchen in Chatsworth, bluebottles, stingrays, ragged-

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tooth sharks, the honking of Egyptian geese in Mitchell Park, maskandi and mbaqanga musicians, jellyfish, bhangra dancers, sandalwood incense, Point Road strippers with albino pythons, mosquitoes, cockroaches, prawns, chameleons, amabeshu skirting a madala's forty-two-inch waist, and geckos; hundreds of skittish geckos some with missing tails, they're on ceilings, on windows, on floors, on doors, in baths, in showers, in crevices and – watch out! a gecko just dropped from my roof.

Despite this madness and the heat, this city is the perfect place for me. Not that I've lived anywhere else in this world. What I like most is that it's a great city for cycling. When my mom died I cycled up to six hours a day. I overtook cargo-laden trucks that moved slowly like slugs up Field Hill. I've even cycled the hundred and sixty kilometres to Pietermaritzburg and back – on nothing but a bowl of Jungle Oats. I've cycled up and down The Valley of a Thousand Hills. And in this crazy heat I leap onto my bicycle and pedal away like a madman. I cycle down my hill, down Francois Road. I know every curve and bump of this road that takes me straight to the Indian Ocean where the harbour is shaped like a dolphin.

On days like this, I hear the comfort of my mother's voice. I sometimes hear her so clearly it feels like she's alive. I picture her standing at our wooden gate, one hand on her hip, the other shading her face from the glare of the sun:

'Look! Look at the Redwinged Starlings, Nigel, they're a beautiful jet-black against a brilliant blue sky. Quick, Nigel! They're flashing their red wings. Oh, don't you love it that they're always in pairs?'

I miss the way she laughed. If you didn't know her, her laugh was quite unexpected. It was a thundering life force. Her laugh would drag out like a deep-bellied 'Haaaa!' It was as if she was trying to release a wild part of herself.

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Sometimes she'd catch herself and that made her nervous, so she'd laugh some more, which made anyone with her laugh even more.

I cycle slowly over Manning, and then pick up speed. I nip across Nicholson and enjoy the bump in the road that bounces me gently off my saddle. I dart over Bartle until I reach Umbilo. At the stop street, I balance for a second or two. I mock pedal half a stroke forward, half a stroke back. I repeat this backward-forward motion to steady myself, before I shoot off again. I never stop to rest my feet on the hot tarmac. I love to swoop down this road. I feel so free, no-one can stop me now, not even my father, a champion Natal track cyclist in his day.

Once I cross Umbilo Road I tuck my elbows in tight against my chest, head bowed down, I pedal faster towards Sydney Road. To my right, King Edward VIII Hospital is a face-brick blur. I ramp over two sets of railway tracks and Francois Road becomes Shadwell. I can smell the harbour. I love how the smell changes from the trains' grease and grime the moment I cross Wisley Road. A rush of sea air funnels towards me. I take my first deep breath of the Indian Ocean, it's so damn fresh it burns a hole right through my chest.

I cycle right to the edge of the harbour wall and get off my bike to rest it against a pole then take off my shoes.

Sitting down I dangle my feet over the side of the harbour's edge, staring at the water just ten metres away. The water slap-slaps the concrete wall. This sea looks so alive today; long, deep breaths arrive slowly, returning to land as if after a long day's hunt.

I'm surrounded by cranes and ships and containers, tugs tooting and ships hooting, the odd lonesome rat and the long-forgotten salty dreams of rotting seagulls. I know Maydon Wharf very well. Since my mom died I've spent many long

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afternoons here. I can count on familiar feelings comforted by my return. They crawl out from the cement cracks, claw out of barnacles and drop down from a seagull's cry and then we sit together thinking, sharing the same view.

I look at the horizon for that big fish, the one that could leap up any second and swallow me whole. I pray it's no ragged tooth shark. A hound shark would be better because they have no teeth, but I've heard they can crush a man's hand with one bite. I imagine a friendly fish that takes one gulp and swallows me whole, then quickly swims out to sea – me safe and warm in its deep, dark belly. There's a small green Bluff to my right where hundreds of pelicans nest, and in the distance there's a thick, foresty outcrop of land with a few residential houses and a Whaling Station.

This is not the first time I've been to this spot. I came here to enjoy my first kiss. I'll definitely come here to open that letter confirming my bursary. I'll show my father I'm no fool; I'm somebody, somebody with something to offer. I'll never be someone who slaves simply to make money. I'm not someone who has nothing to share, someone who leaves behind nothing but piles of tax papers and a greying square photo in an ID book.

I know my ship will come in. Any day now I expect a ship will steam in with my letter from America. I will get into a good art college. Norman Rockwell, you can't get a better reference than that, but at the thought of my father's opinion of me studying art, I feel a cold drop in my stomach. I hug my knees. Then I take out my black moleskin notebook and pencil; the simple action of doing this makes me feel better. I log in the names of the ships, updating my logbook which details every ship I've seen docked here over the past five years.

My most recent sketch is of Mercy Lover, a rusty beast of a ship still anchored to my left. Starting on a fresh page I sketch abstract outlines. I draw menacing Kafka-

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like cranes – dark shadows arching across the sea. I draw quickly, perhaps too quickly. I use violent pencil strokes reflecting actions in the water. I'm confident in my strokes as I draw every day and have been drawing since I was nine.

Is that me fighting in the stomach of the fish, or the violence of slicing my father's head open? The sea takes up the largest empty shape in the foreground, like the rising moon of redemption. This is just the distance I need from my father, perhaps the only distance I can achieve. I'm satisfied with my drawing. I date it, 12 February 1967.

I sketch the outline of a shipping container, and, rather childishly, as if the words existed in real life, I add: 'No dreams, no future'. I laugh out loud as some days I wonder if I'm just dreaming, but I know I'm no dreamer. A fork-lift truck hoots behind me, the driver waves. It's Jimmy who works with my older brother Tommy. What a life; Jimmy is fifty-four, he's worked on the docks since he was my age.

'Afternoon, Jimmy,' I call out.

'Hi Nigel.'

'How you keeping, Jimmy?'

'Good, good. Strong and fit, busy as always, and you?'

'Waiting for my ship to come in.'

'Ah that same ship, hey, the one with your name on.'

We both laugh at the thought. 'You've been waiting, what, five years?'

'I'm going to America next year, you'll see!'

'Good man. Do it. Must get back to work, have a good one Nigel.'

'Thanks Jimmy.'

After about an hour of sketching I reluctantly leave the comfort of my favourite hangout and cycle off to meet my friends. I head along Umbilo Road, which

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takes me right into the city centre. When I reach West Street I pass Bombay Bazaar where I stop for a mango lassie served by a mesmerisingly attractive woman with two neat long dark plaits that stop short of her tiny breasts. Someone shouts her name from the kitchen: 'Nazima!' She glides off. I head past King's Sports, The Hub, Greenacres and then Payne Brothers. I finally arrive at the Troubadour coffee bar in Albany Grove. I really like it here. It's where musicians with big dreams play guitars and sing songs by Joan Baez, and girls dress in black and let their long, dark hair hang free, but I'm less interested in the scene and more interested in the music, especially any great jazz sprouting through the cracks. I've heard about this young singer from Bulawayo, Dorothy Masuka who is singing here tonight with the Harlem Swingsters. I read in Zonk magazine she could outsell Bing Crosby!

At the bar, rather unexpectedly (as I say, this is not why I'm here tonight), I meet an extremely attractive woman. She's impeccably groomed, in a fetching blue mini and striking white heels. She looks a bit over-the-top for a relaxed place like this, but I like her individual sense of style and feel compelled to talk to her.

'Are you here for Dorothy Masuka?' I ask hesitantly, as I feel awkward asking such an obvious question. Why else would she be here?

She looks at me dismissively. I feel like I've just been turned down a perhaps distant opportunity of sitting with her on my lap in a sexy dark corner.

'What? Did you say something?' I instantly dislike her voice, it's annoyingly squeaky and she hardly moves her lips at all when she speaks. How disappointing.

'I said are you here to hear Dorothy Masuka, the twenty-year-old new jazz superstar? She's singing here tonight.'

'Never heard of her.'

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I quickly cut the dull monosyllabic conversation as she reveals absolutely no intelligence or personality at all. She smiles coyly, how manipulating of her, it's obvious she's not coy at all. The ways she holds herself speaks a number of languages to both men and – I'm sure – women, and she's far too predatory for me. I grab my drink leaving her at the bar.

I take my seat beside my friend, James, a tall, slim musician with impossibly long arms who plays excellent guitar for a band called The Jazz Vultures which, James likes to joke, is 'the kind of band that can hang around a stinking good riff for days'.

About my encounter with the lacklustre woman at the bar, I whine: 'A woman who relies on her beauty alone is very quickly most unattractive. When I meet someone I want to feel some electricity. She doesn't necessarily have to ignite me, but she must be alive to the world and not expect the world to charge her energy when she gives off absolutely nothing herself.'

'Oh you sound ridiculous. I adore a beautiful woman. I can find many ways to ignite her,' smirks James.

'You're such a dog. It's not like I'm saying I want to meet a woman who's half-Malay, half-Ethiopian, with skin the colour of sandalwood and charm just as intoxicating.' We both laugh.

'Aye, Nigel, she sounds terrifyingly perfect.' And we drink to terrifyingly perfect women.

'The problem here tonight though, my dear friend, is that most of these women are not here for the music. And what's with the Max Factor pancake faces?'

'You're right, all they do is drink ginger squares and sit side-saddle in neat circles, trying to be earnest talking about leaving Durban to live in London or New

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York so they can at last be part of some idealised fantasy of a bohemian culture.' We laugh.

'Sounds just like you Nigel,' James jokes, and I laugh too as we both know what he says is partly true.

'Perhaps they're hoping they'll get mistaken for Juliette Greco,' I tease, and we both laugh some more. 'Let's hope this Dorothy is the sensation everyone claims she is, otherwise there's a session later at St Cyprians.'

'There's also one on at the Assumption Catholic Church Hall.'

'But do we really want to be hanging out with ducktails?'

'Maybe not – they're such Rottweilers, so territorial. Anyway, I forgot my flick-knife!' I chuckle.

'Bicycles and irons, not a great mix.'

'How did it go with your dad, by the way? You show him your letter from Norman Rockwell?' James says his name with dramatic effect as if he's King Tutankhamen. 'I still can't believe he wrote back to you, you lucky shit. Your dad must have been seriously impressed.'

'I'm still angry. It was a disaster. He's never heard of Norman Rockwell. And he wants me to ditch the idea of being an artist but I'm off to America.'

'Of course you are. And maybe you'll even get to meet the real Juliette Greco!'

'She's French.'

'Well cheers to you, Nigel. To meeting terrifyingly perfect French girls that look like Juliette Greco in America!'

'Cheers!'

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Just then a young woman takes the stage and starts to sing. The room quickly quietens. She has skin the colour of liquorice. Her skin is so shiny it looks like she's been finely polished just for this performance. Her voice is deep and rich, with a mature bluesy edge of a woman twice her age. She also has an innocence that gives the music warmth and feeling.

Dorothy graciously translates the meaning of the songs into English.

'This last song, *Hamba Notsokolo*, is about going to Egoli to hunt for a job. The song warns that you must not go to Cape Town because there is a war there – but go, struggler, go to Egoli and there you will have more chance of finding work.'

The band plays a full forty-five-minute set, and just after their last song everyone immediately stands up to clap. The music lifts the mood; the energy of the Troubadour has been transformed by the young Dorothy Masuka.

'Now that's a singer. What a voice,' beams James.

'Superb! She's so inspiring. I swear to you tonight, Nigel, no matter what happens I will make a living being an artist.'

'Oh shut up, Nigel! You draw every day, you are an artist. I play guitar every day, I'm a musician. And once you get the courage to have your first solo...'

'Solo, hmm? Durban or New York?'

'New York!'

'Of course New York. Cheers to big fat New York dreams!'

'Cheers Nigel! To your big fat New York dreams. Watch out, here's your lady friend.'

'Oh God no.'

'Great legs.'

'Don't be such a dog.'

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'I haven't had a shag in ages.'

'James, you shagged someone last week!'

'A week is an eternity for a fine young man like me.'

'Another beer?'

Before he can answer, she arrives with a friend who, most unfortunately, smells of the standard British remedy for pimples, TCP. I duck to the bar leaving James looking anything but sheepish.

A few hours later the four of us are really drunk. We're so drunk that even Miss TCP smells attractive. And she has the most extraordinary sexy long neck. Miss No Personality is sitting on James' lap and soon we notice we're the last people left. We get so rowdy we're kicked out the Troubadour. James leaves with the two tarts in a taxi and I insist on cycling home. I'm so drunk I land up in a bougainvillea hedge off Marriot Road. I eventually get up after lying on my back for some time singing the popular song *Pine Tree, Pine over Me*. It's quite a tug uphill Francois Road. Luckily I'm pretty fit so I'm home in no time. I arrive just after midnight, reeking of beer.

All the lights are off inside the house and there are no outside lights on so I battle to see where I'm going. I walk into the washing hanging outside our kitchen. I try being quiet as I open the back door and creep down the creaky wooden passageway towards my bedroom. Accidentally I walk into Friday, our cat. In the dim light I take in her striking outline, she's getting fat, but wait, no, I laugh out loud in my drunken state, it's just her head that's getting smaller! I fall about with drunken laughter, luckily my father is a heavy sleeper.

I realise I haven't checked the afternoon post so I excitedly stumble back down the passageway and through the kitchen and out the back door where I knock into the washing a second time. 'Shit.' I finally get to the post box and fumble about

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and pull out two letters. I'm so drunk I can't read a thing. I clutch the letters to my chest and stumble back to bed.

I wake up the next day dressed in yesterday's clothes. I'm still clutching the letters, and then it rushes back. I hold up the envelope to the sunlight, it's addressed to me with a stamp of the American flag. Apprehensive and at the same time excited, I rip it open. Oh my God, I'm in! I've been accepted into an American art college and they're offering me a bursary! The letter says something about 'subject to obtaining a visa to visit America'. I see my life mapped out before me – study in America, exhibit my first solo in a small New York Gallery where I'll meet an agent interested in representing me, and maybe then I'll have my own studio. I'm so thrilled I skip breakfast and call my father.

'Dad, dad, I got in!' I rarely call my father dad. 'I've been accepted into art school and they're offering me a bursary. I'm going to America. I did it!'

'You're not going anywhere. It's too costly for one. You're not being realistic Nigel, we'll talk tonight.'

'But…' I don't bother to finish my sentence, as I know I'm wasting my time. 'Sure, dad, I'll see you later.' I say this knowing full well I will not be seeing him later and maybe not for some time. I instantly sober up. I look at my pale face in the mirror and notice there's a bougainvillea flower stuck in my hair and a nasty long scratch on my chin.

I ring up the US Consulate to enquire about a visa. - The sooner I get out of here the better. The clerk at the consulate explains I have to apply in person and that I need to apply in Cape Town where the consulate is based, or alternatively Pretoria or Port Elizabeth. It's all working out well, as the ships leave from Cape Town so I can stay at a friend of James' who lives in Simon's Town.

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I ring up the train station. There's a train leaving today at five. I write a short note to my brothers and my father, then I ring James.

'James, I'm leaving Durban. I got in. I got that bursary!'

'Nigel, that's brilliant. Well done. Great news. I'll definitely have to visit.' I hear laughter in the background.

'Who is that with you?'

'The girls from last night. You're crazy, Nigel, you should have joined us. It's been a wild night and it's still… hey Nigel, I'll call you later, I'm kinda tied up.' He laughs a dirty laugh.

'Lucky bastard. I'll call you from Cape Town. Have to go there to get my visa.' But James has already put the phone down.

I pack a few clothes and two spare bicycle tubes and cycle to Durban Station. A few hours later I'm on the train bound for Cape Town. I'm all elbows, edging myself out the train window. I can see into the backyards of people's houses. A woman in a blue doek sweeps her stoep. An old man is lazing on a sun chair, his eyes closed. I'd love to sketch him. A small dam looks like a giant inkpot.

I stick my head further out the window to catch the last of the late afternoon sun on my face. There's nothing like a simple view of blue skies and fields of sugarcane to quieten the mind. There's something rewarding about looking out of a train window, not seeing anything in particular, watching the world pass gently by – from a distance. I feel somewhat relieved I don't have to get involved and I'm comforted that everything will be in the same place whenever I return. Will I return, I wonder? And why would anyone, if they had to face their father's wrath?

I head for the welcome lounge, where I meet a sad looking lady wearing gold sandals drinking a glass of white wine on her own. I order a whiskey.

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I'm served my drink by the chief steward, Millie, who says he's been working on trains for the past fifteen years. He has magnificent alabaster skin and never quite looks you directly in the eye. He wears an impeccably ironed shirt and a ridiculously theatrical black bow tie. 'I have a Russian father and a Japanese mother,' he laughs. But he doesn't look very Japanese, or Russian. He's cross between a Malawian butler and a British Airways chief steward with an Afrikaans accent. I return to my cabin with my glass of whiskey for some privacy. There's a mirror behind the door reflecting the passing view. I try sketching it as an abstract landscape. It's very tricky as it constantly changes but there is a linking straight line, the horizon like Pierneef's early signature, the P then a flat line, like how I imagine Table Mountain. The train starts shuddering as we reach a winding section of the track. I gets so bad, I feel like I'm a comet entering the earth's atmosphere.

'On a train you've got to drink yourself to sleep,' an old Durban surfer once told me. So I head back to the bar for another whiskey.

This time I meet a wily man called Dirk. He's overweight and has this massive Adam's apple, which is as animated as he is. After an hour of lively conversation about politics, road trips and jazz, he finally trusts me and confesses:

'I was a diamond dealer, you know.'

And then, dramatically, he blurts out:

'But when I had a 9mm in my mouth, I knew it was time to get out of the game.'

'So what did you do?'

'I got a job as a waiter at XL.'

'And then?'

'I became a manager at Claridges. But now I manage The Cuban Hat.'

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'You mean The Nest.'

'Cuban Hat, The Nest, same thing.'

'You guys make the best double-thick chocolate milkshakes in Durban.'

'We sure do, but I'm getting another whiskey, are you in?'

'Why not!'

We chat for ages about his wild diamond dealing days and he even confides in me, after I tell him my mother is dead, how much he misses his mother who lives in Kimberly. I tell him he's lucky to still have a mother.

'I have an invitation from an American art college and a bursary,' I announce being immensely proud of the fact.

'Congratulations. I hope you have no problems getting a visa. My cousin Jakes, he battled for years to get a visa. It broke his heart because he had met a girl in Ramsgate from Florida, and fell in love, hard. He couldn't visit her for a year and then she got tired of waiting and hooked up with someone else. It really broke him, man.'

I fall silent, thinking about my prospects.

'Don't worry,' he reassures me. 'I'm sure you'll be fine but still, you know, it's always good to have a plan B. My mother taught me that and s'trues, it's something I always do. If you don't get the visa, accept that's your fate.'

'That's just not going to happen.'

'If it does my friend, have a plan B. Life can throw you curve balls, it can't always turn out how you want it to. See these baby-blue eyes, they've seen some heavy shit my man. Trust me. Curve balls.'

'Sure, I know what you're saying,' I lie. We order another two whiskies.

'Make them doubles,' my new friend insists.

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'Look, I never thought I'd stop diamond dealing, it was my dream. But even though I was making big bucks I knew things had to change, because at the back of this hardkop I had another plan.'

I lie to him that I have another plan, that I'll become a motor mechanic, Aston Martins.

'You have refined taste, my friend. I like that.'

I'm never going to work with cars, that's just not part of my plan, but I don't tell him that as I want another whiskey.

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Chapter 2

'You have to be practical, Nigel. Life is tough out there. It's not a world for artists.'

I wake up in the train with the memory of my father's words pounding through the whiskey still swimming in my skull. If that conversation had taken place in our family garage, I'd have picked up a monkey wrench and split my father's head open. Instead we were in the safety of our warm kitchen and I politely tilted my head to one side and listened intently like a good son should.

I remember my father banging away that his father tried to be an artist and how it created endless misery.

'Your grandmother tried everything to get him a job and in the end we were surrounded by paintings of people we never knew, paintings that never sold.' His voice choked up. 'My father lived in a fantasy world.'

I'd never seen him speak like this before. Even his face softened, and for an instant he was a different man – suddenly someone's son and no longer my stern father.

All I can think of now is that if I don't break my father's pattern it'll never be broken. In our family there is only one choice – break or be broken.

I want to be an artist. It makes me happy. But, my father said, 'Happiness doesn't pay the rent. You have to be practical.'

My eyes sting as my anger swells. I stare out at the passing view, why do I need his permission? I'm twenty-one. Why do I need him to believe in me?

Teach art if you want to be linked to that world, that's what he said. Work in a gallery, make picture frames, take photographs, just do something that pays.

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I feel a deep sense of doubt sitting in this train, and once I begin to question everything I fear I'll let go of my dream. I calm myself down by rationalising that no one is ever free of doubt, only the arrogant and untalented. Even Bach doubted himself when he was composing, and Pushkin, I imagine, agonised over each word before he wrote it down. If questioning life through art is my big struggle, I have to question – and with that, there will always be doubt.

'Nigel, honestly now, why do you think you're any different from anyone else?' he had the gall to ask me the day before I left.

'Because I'm your son.'

My father was sensitive enough to know he was exasperating me and so accordingly his tone softened. I remember how he turned away and looked into our garden and I too stared in the same direction, seeking solace in our giant Wild Fig. We stared at it wistfully for some time hoping it would act as nature's ombudsman to save us from our ping-pong conversation going nowhere. I sensed my father wanted to escape my youthful defiance, and I needed to stop and breathe.

'Maybe you don't think I'm different,' I barged on, insensitive to the needed space in this moment. 'I make sense of this world through paint. I make sense of you through drawing. You need to understand I can't live a life unlived.'

'Unlived! Do you think Tommy's life or Gerald's life is unlived, after what this family has been through?'

'It's precisely what we have been through that makes me so determined to live the life I want to live.'

He shook his head. I looked at the floor. I was spent. I took a letter out my pocket. 'Please read this.' I handed him the letter I should have shown him at the beginning of that ragged conversation. 'Maybe this will help change your mind.'

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He took the letter from me, giving it an unnecessarily long look before opening it. The address and my name on the envelope were written with a black fountain pen in distinguished cursive handwriting: Nigel Levins, 150 Francois Road, Glenwood, Durban 4001. Suspicious of the unfamiliar foreign stamp, he rubbed it with his thumb, making sure it was real. He opened the envelope slowly and deliberately, his face devoid of emotion. He held the neatly typed one-page letter on thick vanilla paper. After reading it, and looking somewhat puzzled, he asked accusingly:

'Who is Norman Rockwell?'

'A famous portrait painter,' I explained. 'He lives in America,' I added, as if the approval being international made it more important.

He was silent.

'He's well placed to know the best art schools in America and how to get a bursary. I sent him my drawings, look here,' and I pointed to the part where he wrote that I had great talent.

'He's world-famous. Aren't you at least proud of me for having initiative?'

'I'm your father and I'm telling you that you cannot make a living out of art.'

His face darkened. He remained quiet for some time.

He slammed the table with his fist.

'What's wrong with you?'

I didn't share my true anger at his response. I felt dead inside. I had been saving my ships' passage since mom died. I felt vulnerable and small standing in front of my father as he sat at our kitchen table, which suddenly looked exaggeratedly larger than it really was. If a freak wave hit Durban Harbour that very moment and rose over the ships' containers at Maydon Wharf and swept up Francois Road and

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down our driveway and into our backyard and rushed up the stairs into this kitchen, I would have felt quietly relieved to be swept away back out to sea.

'Answer me!' he shouted.

I tried to maintain my calm.

'I applied for a bursary,' I told him in a whisper.

He raised his voice once again:

'Without my permission?'

I stared at the green melamine floor. If ever there was a time I wanted my mother to be alive, this was it.

'Mom said I could do whatever makes me happy,' I said.

'What she said no longer matters. She's gone.' That really stung.

I stare out the train window and know that she will never be gone, because she's with me every day. What my mother thought mattered, matters a great deal. One day he will be gone, gone forever. The living keep the dead alive, and without me, he'll be nothing.

He had no respect for his father so why should I respect him. When I asked him that day what type of paintings his father did, he ignored me. I pressed on, asking how his father made a living. His answer was bitter: 'By doing nothing. He did nothing but sit around and paint all day.'

I wanted to say, but that's not nothing, what he did was absolutely everything, but I held my tongue. The downside of doing that is that my anxiety increases and my hands begin to sweat, my heart pounds fast and I get dizzy. That day I passed out, and I remember being strangely relieved when the green melamine floor in our kitchen opened up and finally swallowed me whole.

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When I came round, my father helped me up and offered me his handkerchief, which he had dampened to wipe my face. It felt nice and cool. He brewed me some tea and turned on the radio. He knew the radio would comfort me as I was always listening to the radio while reading my art books in my room.

We knew our conversation was spent, but my father had a way of making silence speak. I wanted to tell him I meet artists all the time, I read about them and hear about them on the radio. There are artists everywhere, from the man painting those ugly chocolate-box flowers at the Pietermaritzburg Pavilion at Art in the Park on Sundays, to the art student removing her first ceramic pot from the kiln on a pottery farm in D'argyle Valley and the guitarist strumming away at Troubadour Cafe.

I finally arrive in Cape Town on a blustering Monday and head straight for the US Consulate. It's near the train station so it's just a quick walk pushing my bicycle. All I have is a small backpack. There's a strange mix of architecture here, a few art deco buildings, but not as many as you'd find in Durban, and a great deal of Edwardian and Victorian.

I squeeze my bike into the lift and press second floor.

'You'll have to wait about two to three months' says the lady behind the desk. 'And we can't guarantee your application will be successful. If I were you I wouldn't make any definite travel plans just yet.'

I'm alarmed to hear this as I'm low on cash and hadn't planned on staying in Cape Town for long. I have my ships' passage saved but I daren't touch that. I leave the consulate and catch the 11 am train to Simon's Town.

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I'm hoping I can stay for a few weeks with this guy called Harry who James reckons is very easygoing. Apparently he's an unemployed English teacher and wouldn't mind the company and sharing food costs.

I manage to get onto the train in time and it takes me through suburbs I've never heard of with names like Woodstock, Observatory, Rondebosch, Claremont, Wynberg, then towards Muizenberg, St James, Kalk Bay, Fish Hoek and then finally Simon's Town. The town is nestled in a bay called False Bay; it's named that, explains a local, because sailors once mistakenly thought it was Cape Town Harbour.

Simon's Town is a fascinating seaside village with terrific nautical views of yachts and sleek grey warships. There are penguins, baboons, whales, Great White sharks and, I believe, the rare red moonrise. Young men and women from the South African Navy in freshly laundered blue uniforms stride proudly down St George's Street. People are queuing at the Africa Station Club and a man in the queue with a Jack Russell puppy in his arms tells me here is where I'll eat the best fish & chips this side of the Atlantic.

I spy Agatha Christie sea coves along the coastline and see an unconventional looking postman wearing a red crochet hat slowly pedalling past on his black bicycle. I stop and do a quick sketch of a couple snogging on a bench on the Simon's Town jetty. And at Boulders Beach I see two fluffy grey penguins emerge from a bush.

'Can they fly?' asks a boy.

'Are they birds?' asks his sister.

Their mother sighs.

'There are no whales today.'

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At the top of a steep hill I finally find Harry and his sparsely furnished bachelor flat. He's a likeable looking chap with a wide open smile and a flash of unruly blonde curls.

'Welcome. I'm afraid it's not much but you can crash here until your visa comes through.'

Harry has a bed and a couch of sorts. The couch sags in the middle so your bottom nearly touches the floor whenever you sit down, and the metal springs dig into your back. There's a poster of Juliette Greco up on the wall above the couch. Is she perhaps following me? A bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a large cardboard box turned upside down to create a makeshift table. It's covered with one of Harry's old towels. There's no radio, no clock. Harry has a cassette player on which he plays The Beatles non-stop, as if no other band exists.

'You get to sleep on the tiny bunk bed on the porch,' smiles Harry.

Thankfully it's not winter. The porch looks directly onto other face-brick flats named after African buck: Gemsbok, Eland and Impala. It's wild sleeping on a porch, I feel a wonderful freedom. The best thing about it, I soon discover, is the sea-fresh air, and it's great sitting here sketching and thinking. My view is that if you live in a flat, an open porch or a balcony is crucial.

I've been sleeping on his porch now for five weeks and some days I feel like I'm trapped in a Tingatinga painting, all eyes from neighbouring flats staring at me on the porch. There is absolutely no privacy, not that I'm getting up to anything. Harry doesn't say much, and strangely like an old dog, he sleeps most of the day. He says he scrapes by on his UIF. Luckily, so far, he hasn't asked me to pay any rent. The only treats he splashes out on are *Zonk* magazine and his daily strawberry yoghurt, which

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he slurps straight from the plastic container, like a drink. This he enjoys after his lunch – usually sexy pilchards on white government loaf – and then he smokes a Benson & Hedges Gold.

At the corner café I meet deaf Maria with beautiful red lips, like perfectly ripe tomatoes. Just up the road from the café I find an abandoned house with the doors padlocked. At the bottom of the garden, once I wade through the long grass, I find a family of pine trees and a giant Jacaranda tree. Under the Jacaranda is a portapool with thick pea-green water. No one swims in it, except frogs and mosquitoes. Today a duvet of mauve Jacaranda flowers smothers it; I imagine dead pine needles cloak it in winter.

It's here I meet a hobo called Scratch who tells me he catches barbell from a local stream and the poor buggers land up in this dirty portapool. Scratch agitates the filthy water with his hand and I watch the fish swim in slow circles like trapped pigs. Scratch scoops them up one by one, strokes their slimy cats' whiskers, as if they're pets, and wraps them up gently in an old copy of the *Cape Times.* He sells them at the local taxi rank for a few cents to buy cheap white wine.

I ask Scratch if I may draw his portrait. He laughs, exposing three missing teeth. 'Sure meneer, only if I can keep it.'

'Deal.'

I sketch him under the Jacaranda tree. He's the perfect subject, with his heavily textured, weathered face and intense green eyes. His manner is very restful, he just sits there and asks a few mild questions. I'm more interested in his story than in talking about myself.

'How old are you?' asks Scratch.

'I'm twenty-one, but I turn twenty-two at the end of this month.'

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'What work do you do?'

'I'm an artist.'

'You famous?'

'No,' I laugh. Not yet, I want to say, but don't.

'I'm famous in Simon's Town. Everyone knows me. I even know the Admiral. Do you know the Admiral? I know his wife, she's very nice, very pretty.'

'How do you know her?' I ask, mystified.

'I visit, she gives me sweet tea and food parcels. She's very kind and listens to my stories and always asks how I'm doing.'

'She does sound nice.'

'You should do her portrait, the Admiral would like that.'

'Great idea Scratch, can you set it up for me?'

We both laugh.

A woman arrives wearing a packet on her head and seems to know Scratch. He introduces her to me, her name is Maggie. I'm confounded as to why she is wearing a black plastic packet on her head, and only when she leaves do I notice that she has a terrible limp. She looks about forty, and I think she was speaking isiXhosa.

'Scratch, why does she wear a packet on her head?'

'To keep away the Tokoloshe so he can't land on her head.'

'Won't a French beret do the job?'

He laughs: 'No, she thinks the noise of the packet scares the Tokoloshe away, and I think she is right.'

I give him the sketch and he looks happy with it.

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The next day I find a spot to sketch on Simon's Town jetty and as the weeks fly by I meet some of the locals, like the boatmen and navy officers. One day I even meet the Admiral. He's a short man with silver hair and mischievous eyes.

'Morning, morning! Are you the gentleman that did a portrait of our local man, Scratch?' he asks with an upbeat voice.

I stand up to shake his hand. It's clammy. I like his easy, relaxed manner; he seems the sort of man who could stop two men fighting. Or maybe it's just the smart uniform with all the flashing gold medals that gives him his commanding presence.

'Scratch is like a family friend, my wife Sylvia has a soft spot for him. He mysteriously finds her second-hand poetry books. He's given her Auden, Wordsworth and TS Eliot. My wife is very interested in poetry and art, her sister's an artist, and my wife would really like to meet you. Would you perhaps be free next Saturday, late morning, to come over for tea?'

'Thank you, Admiral, sir, that would be an honour.' We shake hands again and his feels less clammy this time. Perhaps his buoyant personality distracts you on the second shake. He salutes before he leaves the jetty and I'm left standing smiling like a fool, wondering if I should have saluted back.

Saturday arrives quickly and I'm nervous as hell. I wear my best dark blue collared shirt and polish my shoes for ten minutes. I hope they'll serve some sandwiches with tea. I'm eating very simply as I'm running out of money and there's still no word about my visa. The lady at the consulate now calls me by name each time I call.

I leave my bicycle at Harry's and take a brisk walk along St George's Street to Admiralty House. It's a large double-storey white house, very palatial. The gardens are immaculate and there are wonderful milkwood trees, they must be hundreds of

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years old. A navy officer escorts me through to the front of the house where I'm greeted by one of the house staff who takes me through to the back into a greenhouse, where the Admiral's wife is standing among Ice-Berg roses gazing out to sea.

'Ma'am, your visitor has arrived,' informs the house staff.

'Ahh, the artist, Scratch's friend. Welcome, I'm Sylvia.'

'Good morning, thank you for the generous invitation.'

'My pleasure. An artist is always welcome in our home. And dear Scratch speaks highly of you. He was so touched that you drew his portrait, and that you gave it to him. He in turn gave to me. I've had it framed, would you like to see it? It's in the reading room. It's a remarkable likeness, and I think you gave him a certain respectability, a warm sense of dignity. Now Nigel, where did you study?'

'I'm planning on studying in America. I'm in Cape Town waiting for my visa to come through.'

'That sounds exciting. Good luck. You plan to travel by ship?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'You may call me Sylvia. Tea?'

'Yes please, milk and two sugars.'

And there it is, my portrait of Scratch, framed on the Admiral's wall in Simon's Town. I'm pleased I signed and dated it. I've never had one of my portraits framed before.

'I hope you don't mind that Scratch gave it to me.'

'Not at all, it's perfect that it's here, truly it is.' I want to say it's an honour but I don't want to come across as a sycophant.

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Tea is served in fine china cups and I'm offered a plate of freshly made macaroons and a platter of egg and mayonnaise sandwiches. They're cut in dainty white triangles with the crusts chopped off.

Sylvia is gentle and polite, very English, and conversationally adept as she swiftly changes subjects at the appropriate moment. I imagine she gets embarrassed by unnecessary emotion.

It transpires she is from England, in fact, from a little town I've never heard of called Hastings.

'What happens in Hastings?'

'Not a lot. They call it the last coat hanger for the kaftan!'

We laugh.

'Rossetti lived in Hastings, I went to visit his home. Like Simon's Town it's very historical; there's an old town and a new town. My father and mother have lived in the same house in the Old Town for thirty-five years. They say back then it was all Bingo and Belisha beacons. I used to moan about Hastings, but if I go back now I'm sure I'd find it a nostalgic delight. And Beatrix Potter used to go to Hastings for holiday. Remember Peter Rabbit?'

'I love Peter Rabbit.'

'But when I left...' She looks away wistfully. 'I remember being on the train bound for London, staring at the houses rushing into view with their tiny handkerchief gardens and doll's house windows. It was in that moment I knew I had to leave England. I wanted to come to Africa to explore. I remember gazing at the English landscape, the lush green valleys of Wordsworth or Yeats, and when I got here I was surprised, especially up-country, that it's all dry African plains the colour of Weetbix.'

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'But you must love swimming in our ocean?'

'Indeed. I swim in the sea every day, there's a private beach where I walk my dog, Spencer. A Rhodesian ridgeback, you'll meet him. And I love swimming in open-air pools. When I lived in London I had to catch three buses to get to the Lido in Finchley to reach the open-air swimming pool, and it was so cold the swimming teacher wore a fur coat.'

'That must have been a funny sight.'

'It was ridiculous!' She laughs, and as she laughs she looks just like a young girl. She is the absolute image of someone familiar, from her eyes, her button nose, and her wide mouth, in fact her whole face. But right now I can't think of whom.

'When I first got here I'd buy enormous African spears or elaborate African shields from the men and women who gathered outside the British Hotel on Saturday mornings selling woven baskets, brooms and beads. I posted a few gifts to my mother, and it was only after a year of this that she said, in a letter: 'No more exotic souvenirs – we can't afford them!' I didn't know what she was going on about until I discovered that parcels had to be a regulated size and customs had cut the spears in half, which greatly diminished the grandeur of my 'exotic' gifts. Added to this, import taxes cost double the price of the souvenirs. Oh, I'm talking too much. Some more tea, Nigel? Now tell me, which artists do you most admire?'

'I'm a fan of Norman Rockwell's portraits and I find Hockney interesting. You can see he really studied some of the greats, like Vermeer, and I think to an extent French painter Balthus and Edward Hopper. I like that Hockney rarely does commissions and prefers to paint those close to him, close friends and lovers.'

'I love *California Art Collector*.'

'That's a fantastic artwork.'

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'Isn't it great how he borrows from the simple settings characteristic of Early Renaissance paintings? Like the figure beneath a loggia in the scene of Annunciation to St Anne by Giotto.'

'I didn't know that.'

'I studied history of art so I have an unfair advantage,' she giggles girlishly.

'Whereas I just read the art books and take in what I like.'

'Don't you love *The Beverley Hills Housewife*? Maybe you could do a portrait of a Simon's Town housewife?'

'On a Victorian balcony on an overcast gloomy day with a flat grey sea.'

'Ha! And do you like Chagall?'

'Not really. Wonderfully prolific, very versatile but just not what I like.'

'I felt the same until I saw his great series of stained glass windows of the Twelve Tribes of Israel for a synagogue near Jerusalem and what he did for the Metropolitan Opera in New York.'

'I didn't know about those. When I'm in New York I'll definitely go check them out.'

'Who else do you enjoy, then?'

'Artists like Andre Derain influenced by Matisse. And the Russian painter, Alexei Von Jawlensky who I believe joked that art was simply nostalgia for God.'

She smiles. 'I rather like that. Mondrian?'

'I do like Mondrian's work, what a pioneer. I like that he was a big jazz fan and adventurously spent time in New York in the 1940s.'

'I have a postcard from my sister Sophia, she's an artist. She just sent me a postcard where she speaks about Mondrian. Let me get it.'

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She goes off to the study and returns with the postcard. 'This is what she writes: "A gentleman by the name of Dr George Schmidt has said that Mondrian's pictures are far more than merely formal experiments, they are as great a spiritual achievement as any work of pure art." Isn't that so well put? I love my sister's postcards, she makes them herself. What do you think?'

'She's got great talent. I'd buy that. How much for the postcard?'

She laughs: 'Nigel, I invited you here not just for tea and to sell you postcards, but to ask you a favour. My husband would like to commission you to do my portrait for his birthday, would you consider it?'

'I'd be honoured. But the question is, are you a good sitter?'

'I do hope so.' She smiles a radiant smile.

'Would you like a realist portrait or an abstract?'

'You decide.'

'Thank you, I'll give it some thought. Perhaps if you have a photograph of yourself I could study your face and work on some ideas.'

Sylvia leaves the reading room, her voice trailing behind her. 'Let me get my album, back in a minute.' She returns, flushed. She pulls out a recent photograph where her strawberry-blonde hair falls across her cheeks; she looks vastly different to the person standing before me who has her hair tied neatly up in a conservative bun. In the photograph her face is full of beautiful freckles, she must be wearing face powder to cover them up. Looking at the photo I realise I've never drawn someone with freckles before.

'I can do your portrait on one condition.'

'What's that?'

'You wear your freckles.'

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She laughs, her hands reaching protectively for her cheeks. She is so much younger than the Admiral, she must be in her late twenties. I wonder if she has a sister or a cousin.

We chat about Modigliani. She tells me about Beatrice Hastings, the South African journalist and poet who had such a stormy relationship with Modigliani he once threw her out the window! I wonder, which window, where? I'd love to sketch that window.

Sylvia pulls out an art book from a bookcase on Modigliani.

'This was the one Picasso bought from Modigliani,' she says in a hoity-toity abrupt manner, like an over-opinionated art historian about to kick off the lunchtime tour at the Royal Academy of Arts. But there is nothing over-opinionated about her, she's almost too charming, and I'm standing very close. I hope I'm not being too familiar.

She shuts the book and, turning to me, says: 'You do know that Simon's Town is a tiny seaside village?'

I laugh. 'So what am I in for?'

'Not a lot. I can tell you that Kipling came here to enjoy his family holidays and David Livingstone came here for a pint. And that's about it really. Oh yes, and there's so much snoek popping out of the ocean you'd think they were boiling fish. And the seagulls are so well fed; I'm sure you've noticed they're absolutely enormous and come up to your kneecaps.'

After a lovely chat of about an hour that whizzes by, I leave with a parcel of macaroons and sandwiches and confirmation that I will indeed be doing a portrait of the Admiral's wife in a fortnight – unless of course my visa comes through.

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I can't stop thinking about how I'll draw her. Should I use charcoal or should I use paint? Abstract or realistic? And those freckles, do I draw all her freckles or the ones I choose to see? Perhaps I'll choose the golden ones that highlight her wonderful cheekbones and the curve of her upper lip.

I pull out the photograph she gave to me in a pink envelope, which I placed carefully into my moleskin notebook. As I take in her face I see a celestial pattern, her freckles, like stars, are in fact everywhere. It's hard to focus on her spirit without being swept away by these countless beauty marks that give her a radiance, a youthful schoolgirl charm.

I really want to do her portrait but I'm feverishly excited about my prospects of going to America so I ring up the consulate one more.

'Hello it's Nigel Levins here again. I know, sorry I keep phoning, but I'm keen to find out when I can expect to collect my visa?'

'I think we did get some feedback today Mr Levins. One moment, I need to get your file out.'

As I hang on I look at the date on my diary and can't believe I've been in Simon's Town nearly two months now and only have R15 left.

'Mr Levins, are you there?'

'Yes ma'am I'm still here.'

'I'm afraid I don't have good news, Mr Levins. Your visa application has been turned down.'

The blow hits so hard I can hardly breathe. I try gather myself.

'Have you any idea why? Did they see all my documents, my letter of invitation, the bursary information?'

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The lady on the other side of the line has a soothing, motherly voice and attempts to comfort me.

'I am so sorry Mr Levins, there is really nothing I can do to help you.'

'But can't I reapply in a few months' time?'

'May I suggest you try London?'

I'm silent.

'Good luck.'

'Thank you.'

I'm so shattered I cannot walk. I sit down on the side of the pavement. Everything is blurred. I want to cry but my pride prevents me, I'm in a public place. I can't go back to Harry's and tell him because then I'll have to use some of my passage money to catch a train back to Durban. I don't want to go to London. I just want to draw, damnit. Luckily I have a commission with Sylvia, and the money I saved for my ticket.

I hop on my bike and head in the direction of Cape Point. These massive granite boulders in the ocean are truly magnificent – striking shapes to sketch. I cycle pass Boulders Beach and cruise along the winding road until I reach a spot to sit and sketch. I pull out Sylvia's photograph to study it. I really want to reflect her essence, her spiritual energy. Her eyes here are soft and slightly wistful. The photograph is taken in a garden, she is standing in front of a Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow bush, standing posture perfect in her skyscraper white heels, one foot in front of the other, shoulders back, chest out, chin up - the classic model's pose. Her white high-waisted dress hugs her tiny frame and she's wearing elegant white gloves that reach her elbows. There's a lovely sidelight picking up the rich red colours in her hair. Perhaps I should do a painting in colour? She has a vibrancy about her that deserves colour,

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but the look in her eyes suggests charcoal, which would be wonderfully moody and perhaps more interesting.

I notice an old pensioner sitting on a bench, head to the sky, eyes closed, roasting in the midday sun. There is not a cloud in the sky and the horizon is a misty blue, the seas air bracing and fresh. For a moment I'm hypnotised by the gentle backward-and-forward sway of the kelp that resembles bodies floating on the surface. I wish my mind was more still like the sea. I begin to develop an intense headache, so much so that I cannot sketch. I wish I had my own room. I'd go home now, strip off all my clothes and sit in front of a fan drinking a cold beer.

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Chapter 3

I'm back at the US Consulate. The woman sitting in front of me shares a room with a glass-framed American flag. She's built like a truck. Her hands, her chest, her neck, her jaw, her forehead – everything about her is massive. And she has the voice of a man.

'No one here seems to understand that I have an invitation to America,' I fume.

'I've been saving up for my passage to America since I was fourteen. Does that mean anything to you?'

'Mr Levins, please, you're raising your voice. You must be reasonable; we're not responsible for your future.'

'But my future depends on this. I want to speak to the consul-general.'

'I'm standing in today for the consul-general, he's currently out of the country Now will you please excuse me.'

She busies herself with papers on her desk. Despite sensing defeat, I'm determined to get my way and I refuse to leave. I remain in my seat. She ignores me, hoping I'll leave. She calls for someone over the intercom. Great, I'm finally getting somewhere; she's calling someone else to see if they can help, at last she's taking me seriously. A burly man with a tiny waist strides in. Oh no, he's security.

He firmly escorts me out of her office, out of the consulate and into the corridor.

'Ay!' I protest.

He doesn't say a word. He closes the consulate door in my face, smiling at me, exposing terrible teeth for someone who chooses to smile so much.

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'I'm not going anywhere!' I shout at him petulantly through the closed glass door.

I watch him stand in the corner of the consulate office, hands in pockets, idly chatting to the receptionist as if chucking someone out of the consulate were a normal everyday occurrence. He's still smiling. Does he think this is a joke? I want to punch him in the jaw and knock out each smiling tooth.

I'm standing alone in this long corridor ablaze with fluorescent lights drowning in ugly artificial light. I catch my ghostly reflection in the consulates glass door. That damned diamond dealer on the train was right: 'What if this is your fate?' he said. I'm so livid I punch the wall and sink down to the cold tiled floor. 'Curveballs,' that's what he said. 'Life's full of curveballs.' Well, here I sit recoiling from my first major 'curveball', and I feel like shit.

I sit here for I don't know how long, but I know that it's too long to be considered normal. Feeling light headed, I pass out.

I wake to see a number of people peering over me as if I'm on exhibit.

'He may be epileptic' says a faraway voice.

'Give him some sugar water,' says another.

'He's upset,' says the lady built like a truck, who reaches down and gently touches my forehead to check my temperature with the back of her hand. She takes my pulse. Her hands are wonderfully soft.

The security guard approaches, and when I catch his gaze, he smiles.

'It's going to be okay,' the lady holding my hand reassures me, stroking my hair as if I were some old dog she just found on the street.

I grab a handkerchief from my pocket and blow my nose. I wish she was my mother. I wish I could tell her how I really feel, cry in her big truck-driver arms and

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feel unashamed. I want to tell her everything, about my hatred for my father, about my mother, and now terrified I am about my future. I manage a thin smile, like I'm okay, like I'm a man with an exciting future, like I'm a man who can deal with this, and so much more.

'Tea, two sugars?'

'Please. And thank you for being kind. Thank you.

'What happened?' she enquires.

'It was a dreadful shock that they turned down my visa application. My plan is to go to America and become an artist.'

'You don't have to go to America to become an artist, you can be an artist right here. I'm a musician, I play the piano but I live in Wynberg.' She laughs a fragile laugh.

I could never imagine this woman playing the piano. I wonder what type of music she plays. Rachmaninov? The Bee Gees? Simon and Garfunkel?

Surprisingly, the security guard returns with my tea. I humbly accept his peace offering in a mug emblazoned with a red, white and blue American flag. He's still smiling, but for some reason, perhaps because he's made me tea, his smile is no longer offensive; it's strangely comforting. What a novel way of dealing with conflict, or maybe it's just the way he is, a man who lives with an easy smile. I feel like a downright tit. I steady myself to slowly get up.

'Are you going to be okay?' she asks.

'Yes thanks, I'll be fine, just a nasty turn, it happens now and then. Thank you for the tea and for your kindness.'

'You should have a medical, have your blood pressure checked. Maybe get checked for epilepsy and diabetes, just to be sure.'

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Now I've had enough, charity annoys me. I don't want pity, I want my visa. I have to get out of here.

I smile a weak smile, 'Thanks, I will,' knowing full well I won't.

They walk me to the lift.

Downstairs I take a slow walk and pass the flower sellers in Adderley Street. A woman in a baggy green jersey and a purple headscarf singsongs:

'Flowers for you, Sir, flowers for your lovely, flowers for your troubles, fresh, fresh flowers. Buy these beauties and your love bubbles.'

Her voice is soft and warm.

'What are those called?' I ask pointing to a startling orange bunch.

'Pincushion Proteas sir, take a bunch for your lovely lady.' She pulls them out from their bucket and swiftly wraps them in the *Cape Times* before I've even agreed to buy them.

'You like them, you must have them.'

And she thrusts them into my hand. She has a wide, beautiful smile, like a watermelon. I buy them despite being able to afford them, but they're the most unusual flowers I've ever seen and they'll be beautiful to paint.

I cross the busy intersection at Strand Street towards the station. On the train I secure a quiet seat on the east side so I can lay my head on the window and watch the Atlantic Ocean fly by. When I reach Muizenberg I stare at the sea and cry like a baby. God, I'm a mess. Thank god the train is half empty. I look out across the sea at what looks like some faraway land the Hottentots Holland Mountains. What did Harry tell me about these mountains? Something about the start of the Great Trek in 1835 when migrants decided to leave the Cape Town area, or the Cape Colony, as it was then known. Ah, yes, that was it, it's the first mountain range they crossed. Apparently the

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cuts and wheel markings from their ox wagons can still be seen in the rock formations. I must go check them out; these Cape granite mountains must be something like five hundred millennia old.

The train stops at Fish Hoek Station. There's a small beach here I'd like to explore. I look more closely at my bunch of flowers. I pick out one and study it closely. I hold it up against the light. It's a fascinating design, like an underwater sea creature. I look at one thin, long orange tentacle with its waxy red tip. It does looks just like a pincushion. Inside the flower there's a white mist resembling a spider's nest. At the base of the flower head are multiple rings of purple-tipped green bracts covered in fine hairs. It's a hairy plant. Really close up it looks like an arachnid.

The train gets going again and we slowly snake along the coast passing Glencairn then Sunny Cove. There's a tug in the bay and a family of white-throated Cape Cormorants on a sun-bleached rock. There's a man walking in the opposite direction of the train across the rocks. He's holding an orange. I like the colours of his dark black hand against bright orange. It makes me want to paint. I'd like to do a portrait of him sitting at a table with his orange and next to him in a vase, of these unusual flowers.

Back at Harry's flat, I put on a brave face.

'Great news,' I announce to Harry. 'I got my visa finally,' I lie, deluding myself.

'Congratulations! At least one of us is getting their act together. When are you off then?'

'The next ship leaves in about a month, I hope you don't mind if I stay on until then?'

'Not at all, not at all.'

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'Great, that's a relief. Thanks.' I lie so easily. I've never been one to lie but it feels right to lie about this. I'm protecting myself after all.

'Shall we go out and celebrate?'

'Let's!'

We drink our first celebratory pint on the veranda of the British Hotel. This is how I wanted to celebrate the news so I may as well do it anyway, why not?

I pick up the *Cape Argus*.

'This guy is constantly in the news. When was it exactly that he did the first human transplant?' I ask Harry.

'Chris Barnard, the media darling, they love him here in the Western Cape. He did that famous first transplant last year. I think now he must be on his third.'

'I wonder if he needs a portrait on the hospital wall. He must be full of it now, being so world famous. Maybe I'll approach him.'

Shaking his head, Harry laughs.

'Equatorial Guinea stands to gains independence from Spain later this year, more riots in America against the war in Vietnam, and oh, listen to this, Pope Paul VI bans Catholics from using contraceptives for birth control!'

'You can't be serious. Let me look at that. Bloody hell, what a daft thing to do. Not much local news here, no local politics.'

'Come on,' I grab the newspaper back from him, 'I'm reading this, and you owe me the next pint.'

That night we watch the rocking Young Jazz Man Band play down the road at Kilmarnock Hall. It's an eight-piece band and they're so relaxed on stage, clearly comfortable with one another. The saxophonist is quite the character. He wears a black hound's tooth hat. His solo is extraordinary, he's giving off so much energy

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he's sweating like a pig. Come to think of it they all look so slick dressed in black suits, really classy. The music is very Fats Waller-ish and everyone here is loving it, even the barmaid is dancing as she pours drinks at the bar.

'God, James would kill to hear this band,' I tell Harry.

He smiles.

'You know he got three girls into bed once, playing Leonard Cohen songs on his guitar.'

'At the same time?'

'No, he played the songs first, then he had sex. You can't have sex while playing a guitar, but then again, actually maybe you could.'

'I meant did he attempt to sleep with the girls at the same time?'

'Hah! Maybe.'

'Why are you painting then and not playing guitar, you idiot?'

'You bloody right, Harry. All men should be playing guitars.'

'Playing Leonard Cohen on guitars.'

'Singing Leonard Cohen, not just strumming.'

We stumble out when the music finishes at 5.30 am.

'Fancy a swim?' I mumble.

'You're mad, I'm off home.'

Harry lopes off in the opposite direction.

I walk down to Long Beach where I strip off. It's a still morning, the sun is rising and the Kalk Bay fishermen are already out. There are two ships on the horizon. Roman Rock Lighthouse is still there. A Pied kingfisher dives into the sea, giving me confidence to run in. Christ, it's freezing, but thankfully today the water isn't as icy as it usually is.

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I'm still pretty drunk as I float in the shore break and stare at the sky looking for shapes in the clouds. I see an owl. Could that be a dragon? There are a few seagulls flapping about, or are they kelp gulls? All the time I'm floating, Marvin Gaye's *I heard it through the Grapevine* is playing itself out in my head.

A few days later the reality of having very little money kicks me into gear to find a job. Maybe I'll tell everyone my bursary fell through because it took so long to get my visa and that they recommended I reapply next year. I must write to Tommy again, the last letter he wrote in reply to my postcard was pretty awful, as it transpires my father is still furious with me.

I walk the streets the entire morning looking for work, but there's nothing, absolutely nothing. I look for work in hotels to garages to cafes to boat shops, but nothing. I walk into Mr Raffee's grocery store to buy a Coke. He's sitting behind his three-sided counter at the far end of the shop, saying his prayers with his head down, the Koran on his lap. I can't see his face for his fez.

'Morning Mr Raffee, do you perhaps have any work for me?'

'No, sorry.'

I pay for my bottle of Coca-Cola, and as soon as he's placed the money in the till and shut it, he's off again with his prayers.

But as I leave, he calls out, 'Have you tried the funeral parlour? There's always work at funeral parlours. Try Paradise Valley behind the mosque, tell him Mr Raffee sent you.'

'Thank you, Mr Raffee.'

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Tucked away up a cobbled street is a small shop with a blackboard outside that indeed reads: Paradise Valley Funeral Parlour. Inside, there's a man sitting at his desk with a hand-written sign above him: *The secret to happiness is being slow.*

'Morning.' I point to the sign, 'I guess there's no rush if you're dead, then.'

He laughs.

He's in his fifties, with thick bushy eyebrows and a smile wider than Lake Kariba. I tell him Mr Raffee sent me and he's surprised I'm looking for work. He jokes: 'It's dead exciting work if you can get it!'

I laugh politely.

'Are you the owner?'

'I am, I am.'

I ask him again, more directly. 'Do you perhaps need some help around here?'

'Your timing is good young man, your timing is good and you can make me laugh, which is what we need around here, just what we need. Meet the fire master of Simon's Town.' He introduces me to a man who comes down the stairs, perhaps his young assistant.

'Nigel, this is Rattex.'

We shake hands. It's only when he shakes my hand that I momentarily notice his left hand reaching slightly out his pocket and then it retreats, quick as a snake. It's burnt. I hope it's not work related, I can't afford to lose a hand.

'Interesting name, how did you get it?'

'Mr Fahiem here says I'm poisonous with the ladies,' he smirks, now safely keeping both his hands in his pockets. Rattex has a raspy voice and the man's skinny as hell. I'm surprised his nickname is not Bones. Mr Fahiem offers me a cup of coffee and talks to me as if he's known me and my family his whole life.

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'We do about twenty or thirty burnings a month, mainly old folk, like old navy officers. Anyone dead really. We have a standard range of coffins, a simple standard range, but the little old ladies prefer to keep their husband's ashes. Rattex!' he shouts at him even though he is standing right next to us, but there is affection in his voice.

'What do you think of Nigel?' he asks as if I'm not in the room. I smile shyly.

'He seems alright, but would you be prepared to serve tea to little old ladies and listen to their stories?'

'Sure I will.'

'We sometimes have to deal with very distraught people,' says Mr Fahiem. 'Some have strong spirits, can handle death, most can't. Got the stomach for it?'

Before I can answer, Rattex chirps: 'It can be heavy when the whole family comes in. It's intense, you have to keep the customers happy and pretend you know how they're feeling, even if you don't give a shit, which we don't, really, as we've never met the dead people before, but we do care for the people left behind because they're the ones in pain. Some days you really feel it hard, it just adds up.' He gestures with a hand under his chin. 'The small things can set me off,' he adds 'especially all the crying. I can't handle all the crying.'

'Easy,' says Mr Fahiem. 'You're scaring him off. Nigel, can you start today?'

'Yes,' I beam. 'Thank you Sir. Do I need a uniform?'

'You're fine as you are, but maybe we should get you a naval uniform. That would go down well with the old ladies,' he chuckles. 'You happy to wear a naval uniform?'

'Whatever you want.'

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'Good man, good man. Just a jacket I think, maybe even a few medals.' He laughs. 'You can wear them here in front, just in the front. Rattex refuses to wear a naval jacket.'

'No problem and thank you again Sir.'

'Call me Mr Fahiem.'

'Thank you Mr Fahiem.'

'Come,' instructs Rattex, and he skulks upstairs while I trundle up behind him.

'You like music?' he asks.

'I sure do, jazz, rock n roll, good music.'

'The last guy who assisted me got fired because he didn't like music.'

'Good reason as any I guess,' I say, although I'm totally mystified.

'I like to play the dead one last song before they go. The way I choose the music depends on their hairstyles. I check out for scars and tats. If the men have a side parting and a thick full fringe like yours, I play Elvis. If the women have soft, curly hair I play jazz. Long hair, I play The Beatles, and for men with short hair, I play Cliff Richard. I have lots of music like The Shadows, Aretha Franklin, The Bee Gees… and *Daar kom die Alabama, die Alabama kom oor die see.*' He sings it for me, with his strange, raspy voice, and he does a quirky little dance in circles. How wonderfully odd.

He sniggers: 'Have you heard there's a new band called *The Grateful Dead?'*

I chuckle. 'I prefer Marvin Gaye, you should play them some Marvin Gaye. And for the ladies, Nina Simone. And how about Perry Como? You need to give them a smooth exit.'

He laughs. 'You're pretty smooth yourself, Mr Nigel. Do you know some lady who came in here last week told me that we have nine exit points from this life?'

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'Really? M'mm. Hey, I can ask the family what the deceased's favourite song was, and if they have the cassette tape.'

'Man you're good.'

I smile. I'm relieved to find work to distract myself from my plans, which are temporarily on hold, and I like the setup here, it's perfectly strange.

'The little old ladies like fantsy-pantsy music, like Mozart,' continues Rattex. 'They love that shit.'

'I like Mozart.' He politely prefers to ignore the fact that I like Mozart too.

'There was this one old lady, I played her Beethoven's Ninth symphony and I swear I saw her toes move.'

I laugh at the thought. He laughs at the memory. It's an unexpectedly high-pitched laugh.

Rattex lets on that he lives in a two-berth Sprite caravan at the top of Cotton Road. I ask him if he needs a roommate.

'How much can you pay?'

'Depends how much I make here, but I need to make a plan as I'm living on someone's porch for a few more weeks, then I'm out.'

'You can pay me…' and he thinks about it, then grins, 'in music and Friday beers and a bit of cash.'

'Sounds acceptable.'

We shake on it. We chat more and it transpires that Rattex's mother died when he was ten.

'She was stabbed by the neighbour's wife for sleeping with her husband, or that's what my father told me. After the funeral he disappeared. My Aunty Janet said

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he went to Bloemfontein and got remarried, to some lady who worked in a butchery. He never sent me biltong or T-bones or whatever. Kak, hey?'

I nod in agreement.

'Some fathers are kak fathers. They don't plan to be, they just are.'

'How did you get to meet Mr Fahiem?'

'His first name is Fahiem, he just likes to be called Mr Fahiem. I met him when he did the funeral for my mother and he gave me a packet of Simba salt and vinegar chips because I was crying so much. That was the best-tasting packet of chips I ever ate. Back then he worked in Woodstock, Kitchener Street. That was before he got evicted. We also got evicted and my aunty left us, so after that I asked him if he had any work for me and he took me under his wing, then we moved out here. What's your story?'

I tell him, but I lie again. I'm really enjoying lying. I can be anyone, absolutely anyone at all. I tell him I've been travelling up in North Africa, Morocco and Egypt doing odd jobs. He believes me, some people can be so trusting, such fools.

'What's your real name?' I ask, thinking it would be good to change mine.

'Joseph Lazarus Scheepers. Let me show you the coffins.'

A fortnight later I'm back at Admiralty House. It's heaven being back. The garden is quiet and sheltered. There's even a private beach. The rolling lawns stretch about four hundred metres down to Alison's Avenue, taking you to the tennis courts. Once again I'm greeted by an imposing brass cannon at the front door, and inside, the first thing you notice is this wonderful natural light flooding down the staircase from a large window upstairs.

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As I wait for Sylvia I spot some superb marine oil paintings from the late eighteenth century. I particularly admire the rather good attempt to pay tribute to Turner in the painting *Shipping with Cattle on the shore*, by Hendrick Jacobz Dubbels. I'm so taken by the painting I don't hear Sylvia coming down the stairs.

'Nigel!'

'Sylvia.'

'You like this one?'

'I do, I really do.'

'Well let me show you some more, I haven't given you a proper tour of the house, or have I?'

'No.'

'Welcome to Sylvia's tours. There are countless rooms on two levels and each room, from the drawing room to the wine cellar, has its own original antiques and original works of art.'

As we walk up the stairs I can't help looking at her long white-stockinged legs. I have a thing for white stockings. And she's wearing the most incredible dress. It's olive green with peacock blue detail around the hemline. Her hair is worn loose and smells of apples. It's hard to focus on what she's saying.

'After several additions, including a second storey, it became known as the Widow Hurter Boarding House. In 1814 it was bought by the Royal Navy and then converted into Admiralty House.'

'Wow,' I respond overenthusiastically and feel a twit for doing so. 'So that's how long it's been the residence of the Royal Navy's Commanders in Chief before it was handed over to the SA Navy.' Big deal, what am I talking about? What a banal thing to say, she of course knows all this.

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'The SA Navy took over in 1957 and now we have Navy Band concerts in the gardens. You must come to the next one if you're still here.'

'Thanks. If I'm still here…' I temper my enthusiasm in an attempt to sound more mysterious, '…I'd like to.' I don't say what I really feel, that I'd love to.

I can't believe I lie to her too. I rationalise that it sounds more impressive to be going off to America than staying here. I don't want to disappoint her, or make her think I no longer have a dream. I have to believe I'll end up going somehow. I cheer myself up thinking I'm about to paint a beautiful woman, the Admiral's wife. And hopefully this will be the start of more commissions.

'Wasn't it terrible news last week about the death of Martin Luther King.'

'Awful. It's truly unbelievable. And he was so young, only thirty-nine.'

'Kennedy's speech was great, though, did you hear it on the radio?'

'I did. I liked that he quoted Aeschylus. "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

'Beautiful.'

There is silence between us as we think about it while staring at a small Dutch Armoire in oak. Or is it ash? I don't ask.

'It's a difficult time for the United States, are you sure you want to go there?'

And in that moment I realise I have been so self-absorbed about my ambition that I haven't given much serious thought to the political climate there, never mind here in South Africa.

'I do, I really do.' But I'm suddenly not quite convinced.

'Isn't it sad that the United States is mirroring what is happening here in this country between the blacks and the whites?' comments Sylvia.

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I'm only half listening to her. I'm preoccupied by my own thoughts, and I don't want to get into a conversation about politics, not right now.

'Sorry, when did you say this house was built?'

'The original house dates from 1743, it was built by Antoine Visser.'

The room we're standing in has an impressive pair of Boarding pistols framed on the wall, and under it is a Regency sofa – Harry could do with one of those – and what a magnificent Georgian fireplace.

'This furniture was designed by Sir Herbert Baker, and here we have a ridiculous entire wall dedicated to the British Commanders in Chief and South African Chiefs of the Navy.'

They are framed photographs of a host of surly looking men. They all seem to have rather thick necks, like Staffordshire Bull Terriers. Most unattractive.

'And this is *Shipping in a choppy sea*, and that's *Shipping on a calm sea*,' she laughs. 'Both by Peter Monamy, whom, I have to confess, I'd never heard of.'

'Nor I.' I smile, but of course I have. I love his work and have studied just about all the painters inspired by the ocean.

'This statuette is *Ships' Boy with lantern* presented by the Argentinean Navy. And these are the keys to the Slave Quarters from 1814.'

Once we've looked at nearly every room in the house, I choose the perfect spot to do the portrait, with Sylvia sitting on a window ledge with soft natural light on her face. I set up my paints, and am grateful she has loaned me one of her sister's easels. But even before I start I'm disturbed with thoughts of American riots, dead pacifists and Greek poets. My thoughts are thrown by shouting in the street.

'What could that be?' I ask Sylvia.

The shouting gets louder. It sounds so close, like right outside.

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'Nigel, please speak to the officer at the gate and find out what's causing this commotion.'

I rush out and am confronted with two panicky female house staff with headscarves covering their hair staff looking out the window. They step back to let me take a look. Outside I see hundreds of people in the street. What could be happening? I run downstairs and am met by a young naval officer.

'Have you seen the Admiral's wife?' he asks breathlessly.

'She's upstairs. What's going on?'

'Evictions.'

'Who is being evicted?'

'The non-Europeans.'

'Why?'

'The Group Areas Act is being enforced in Simon's Town. The town is to be declared a white group area.'

'How many people are being evicted?'

'About seven thousand people.'

'That's impossible.' The funeral parlour will be closed, and Mr Raffee's grocery store, Mr Fahiem and Rattex will be evicted again, and what about Maggie and Scratch?

'Where are they moving everyone to?'

'Gugulethu, Slangkop and Gaidoo Valley.'

I've never heard of any of those places. 'This is terrible, who ordered this?'

'The government. The Town Council are not happy and nor is the Navy, it's going to destroy the community and just about all the shops and businesses. We're being as civil as possible under the terrible circumstances. As of today, they're

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evicting mostly women and children, but the men are not having it so there is a big upset. I believe the imam told the men at the mosque this morning that the people would be moved today. Apparently the men wept.'

'It's shocking. It doesn't make any sense at all. If the community gets moved how will anyone get to work, or go to church or mosque?'

'The Navy and the council are busy right now preparing a document to present to government to fight.'

I continue down the stairs, looking back at the naval officer. I tell him, 'I'm going to have a look.'

'I wouldn't go out there in the street if I was you, best remain behind the gate,' he warns.

Outside in St George's Street I see beds, tables, chairs and crockery, in a jumbled heap on the pavements. Clothes are spilling out of boxes and drawers. Children are crying and women are carrying meagre belongings in packets and suitcases. A woman shouts out to a policeman: 'What have we done wrong to be chased away like this?' He ignores her.

Six lorries are parked in the road and families are packing their possessions but everything is getting mixed up so no one knows who owns what, or where anyone is going. I recognise a woman with a limp and a packet on her head; it's Maggie, and behind her is Scratch.

'Scratch! Scratch!' I shout but he can't hear me. 'Maggie!' But it's no use and I feel a real coward standing behind the safety of this wooden gate with SA Navy officers on either side. I don't want to join the crowd, but instinctively I know I should be doing something.

'Nigel!' I hear Sylvia calling me from the upstairs window.

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When I get upstairs I explain about the evictions.

'It's started.'

'You knew about this?'

'The naval officer just informed me but my husband told me there was talk of it possibly happening in Simon's Town. I need to go down to the Black Sash office.'

'What's the Black Sash?'

'It's a trust organisation that helps the disadvantaged. Sorry Nigel, but I must go because if we don't fight this and the government gets its way, our pensioners will have to walk to Kommetjie to collect their pensions, and parents will be forking out their hard-earned cash so their children can catch trains come back to Simon's Town to get to school.'

'It's terrible. And what about the Muslims? Is there a mosque where they're going?'

'I doubt it. It's all so unbelievably cruel and inhumane.'

'I really don't know what to say, but I think under the circumstances we should leave the portrait for today.'

'Definitely. I need to make some calls and speak to my husband and then go down to the office and find out how I can be of any help. Lunch is prepared so you're welcome to stay and eat, but I must get going.'

I leave after a quick, sombre lunch in the kitchen, and walk back to Harry's. The lorries have left and hundreds of families have already gone. Some families are sitting on the pavements waiting for instructions. Further along down St George's Street I walk past empty homes and doors banging in the wind. Jubilee Square, opposite the local butchery and café, is empty. Mr Raffee's is shut. I walk up to

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Paradise Valley Funeral Parlour and the blackboard sign is gone, they're closed. Apart from the odd squawk of seagull, Simon's Town is deathly quiet.

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Chapter 4

I scratch my balls while I take in the harbour view from Harry's balcony. It's a real scorcher, not a cloud in the sky, and it's unusually quiet for a weekday morning. Harry is still in the shower, singing *Sexual Healing.* He's really got into the groove of Marvyn Gaye. Poor guy, maybe he just needs a shag.

Standing on this balcony I feel a strong sense of déjà-vu. I had a very disturbed night's sleep. I dreamt Simon's Town was swallowed by the sea and all the people evicted were no longer angry, simply because Simon's Town no longer existed. How ridiculous, of course they would still be angry. I would have been furious. In my dream I jumped off this very balcony into a little wooden boat with a bunch of local fisherman and we rowed all the way to Kalk Bay. I kept looking back, I couldn't believe the entire town was gone. I was very anxious. I was especially concerned about Sylvia.

But Simon's Town is still here and I'm just drowning in my own anxiety again. Without waiting for Harry to get out the shower I head out to the local café to buy the morning newspaper. Thankfully Mr Raffee's shop is open again.

'Sold out,' says Mr Raffee without even looking up at me as he packs boxes with his family; three tall sons and his beautiful daughter, the shy Lameez, and Mrs Raffee, a muskier, older version.

Mr Raffee stops packing to stretch. Hands on hips, he arches his back.

'Ahh,' he groans in relief. 'We've been packing all night for the move, so please buy what you can today because we'll be gone by tomorrow.'

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I don't know what to say, so I say nothing. I just stand there watching them efficiently packing boxes. His children and wife don't even take a break. It doesn't occur to me to help as they look like a tight team. The mother and daughter pack the canned food into big boxes, while the sons, together with Mr Rafee, lift the heavy boxes, and once they're filled they place them in high piles in a far corner.

'I'm sorry you're moving,' I offer, rather pathetically. I truly am sorry, not just for him and his family but also, selfishly, for myself. Mr Raffee is a great daily comfort and his shop reminds me of old style Durban cafes. It's reassuring that Mr Raffee is always sitting behind his three-sided counter at the far end of his shop, and that he opens early and closes late.

'We are very sorry too. We have no choice.'

His face is unusually drawn and pale; clearly he's still in shock. I leave without buying anything, as I don't want to disturb them while they're packing.

The next café is closed, and the next. I can't get a copy of the *Cape Times* anywhere. Being someone who relishes the routine of reading the morning newspaper, I feel like I've missed out on my daily breakfast of information. Irritable, without knowing the latest details, I reluctantly accept defeat and retreat to the gentle comfort of an avenue of cycads on a wooden bench in Jubilee Square. The newspaper street banner glares at me, taunting me with: 'Simon's Town faces disruption.' I'm tempted to catch a train to Cape Town to the *Cape Times* office to get a newspaper. I imagine what my mother would do in a situation like this, what would she do if she couldn't get what she wanted? I know exactly what she'd do. Unlike my father, she'd go into Mr Raffee's, switch on their portable radio to something calming like classical music, then after serving tea she would get stuck in and help. I immediately get up

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and go back to the Raffees'. Mr Raffee doesn't say a word but Mrs Raffee smiles at me and passes me an empty box. We pack in silence.

The boxes with tins are heavy as all hell and after an hour my back is aching. I take a break returning to my wooden bench at Jubilee Square. Mr Raffee's youngest son, Jidwat arrives a few minutes later with a cold bottle of Coca-Cola. 'My mother and father say thank you, Mr Nigel,' he beams.

'Sit,' I suggest, and Jidwat enthusiastically joins me, swinging his legs under the bench like a pendulum.

'You moving too, Mr Nigel?'

'Why do you ask?'

'We can help you pack.'

'Thank you Jidwat, but I'm not moving. Not just yet.'

'Why not?'

I squint into the sun. 'Do you know why you and your family have to move?'

'No, Mr Nigel, do you?'

I hesitate, unsure whether it's my responsibility to tell this nine-year old what is really happening, and especially when it's really something serious his father should tell him.

'Your father owns a shop. All the people who own shops have to move,' I lie. 'I'm allowed to stay because I don't own a shop.'

'Oh.' He pauses and thinks about what I've said for a moment. In the silence I feel cowardly and cruel. Perhaps his father has made up a similar story. What can you tell a child of nine? The truth would be good, I guess, but it's painful enough having to move from all that is familiar and have his young life rudely disrupted like this.

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'Thank you.' He looks me directly in the eye with a firm gaze, just like his father, but here is a child still full of wonder. 'No one has told me the truth except you Mr Nigel, not my father, or my mother, or my brothers, or my sister.'

'Maybe they don't know,' I say, sheepishly.

'So now I can tell them,' and he smiles as if I've shared a vital playground secret. Before I can add another word or adjust my story, Jidwat scampers off back to the shop.

I get up nervously and take a brisk walk in the opposite direction. I land up as if on automatic pilot at Sylvia's. When I arrive I'm greeted by a new naval guard.

'Where's Themba?'

'Langa, to help his family move.'

'He's coming back?'

'I don't think it will be very practical. He said it will be too expensive catching a taxi and two trains every day. He would have to catch the train at midnight and the next one back to Simon's Town leaves at 4 am, so he won't get to see his family much, and he'll only get three hours sleep.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'It's the new law.' He says as if it justifies it all.

'Sylvia in?'

'She left early for another Black Sash meeting in Cape Town.'

Walking back to Harry's it's eerily quiet as most of the cafes and shops are closed and it's nothing to do with anyone being at mosque.

Later that afternoon I finally get my hands on a copy of the *Cape Argus.* I double-check it's not yesterday's news; it is indeed today's newspaper, dated 5 September 1967. On the front page there's a photograph of the Main Street with this

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warmly familiar avenue of cycads in Jubilee Square with the bench I just sat on. The accompanying story, written by journalist Barbara Willis, is very well reported, surprisingly objective and most sympathetic to the tragedy of the evictions.

'More than 4 500 people – more than half of this centuries-old community – are now to be ejected from the village which is, and always has been, their home,' she writes. She explains that the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist Churches have predominantly non-white congregations and the evictions will result in the removal of the majority of worshippers. 'The religious life of the town will be drastically disrupted. The Moslem community, to which belong the Malays, many Coloured people and the majority of Indians, have held religious services as far back as 1810.'

Then the journalist writes that the Indian shopkeepers work longer hours than anyone else, as much as eighteen hours a day at times, and I think of how hard Mr Raffee and his family work, performing an essential service in a seaport where dockyard workers and ships' crew keep irregular hours. She says that shopkeepers are able to do this because they live on their premises, and members of the family work in shifts, then she points out that the Malay and coloured tailors have an extensive trade in making naval uniforms and that it's vital they live near their customers. I'm stunned to read the words: 'There will be left in the town not one single fresh produce dealer, no fresh fish market, no cobblers, no tailors.'

I place the newspaper down, taking it all in. Surely the government can't get away with this. It doesn't make economic sense, never mind being socially unjust. I pick up the article again and the only positive news I read is that there has not been one objection from any section of the community or from any racial group against another, and that overwhelming and unanimous evidence has been provided that no

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Group Areas Proclamation is wanted or warranted in Simon's Town. How crazy then that this is actually happening, that the government is getting away with it.

I take out my moleskin book and as I write down the names of all the cafes that have closed their doors I am wondering if history can be reduced to a mere inventory? I'm shocked by the long list I've written and wonder how long I can live here now that half the town is missing. I miss the street buzz, much gentler than Cape Town, but still there was a buzz, a soft lazy seaside pace, and it was the people here who created it.

I head for the British Hotel to see who is playing tonight, only to discover that the whole month's gigs have been cancelled.

'Why are the gigs cancelled?' I ask the lady behind the bar. She's about forty, with long, sandy, frizzy hair, heavy blue eyeliner, a bright yellow blouse and jeans that are way too tight for the poor shape she's in.

'The musicians have been evicted. They can no longer pop home up the road after their gig so if they play late, as they do, they can't get home, as there are no late-night trains.'

I sit on the balcony with a few sailors and drink a cold beer, wondering what I should do next. I watch the clouds until the sun sets, which is early this side of the mountain. It's a glorious evening, not a breath of wind. I am taken by two clouds the shape of seahorses drifting over the Atlantic. One minute they're here, perfectly formed with soft orange light streaming through their tails, then they're gone.

I'm about to get up and leave when a woman asks:

'Is this seat taken?'

'Not at all, you're welcome to join me.' I attempt to charm her, although all she probably wants is the chair, not me.

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Surprisingly she sits down to join me but doesn't say a word and stares out to sea. It's very comforting that she doesn't need to talk; I find it annoying when strangers gabble about nothing, just wanting to be friendly. They're usually lonely or just annoyingly talkative. She orders a cool drink and pulls a book from her bag; it's Brecht. The sun has set but there's enough natural light to enjoy reading for a little while longer. I watch her for a moment from the corner of my eye, trying to avoid being creepy. She has a wonderful long nose and wild curly dark hair, very bushy, very alive. She sits magnificently still, very contained, like a bronze sculpture in a gallery. And her scent is heavenly sweet, not over-intoxicating but intoxicating enough to make me want to sit closer. The sailors leave and the bar lady in the very tight jeans turns up the music, *You're My Everything* by the Temptations, and she hums along to the schmaltzy tune. It must be a favourite song because she's humming really well. I would never turn up music when the softness and quietness of twilight sneaks in. I was enjoying the relative silence, that's if you ignore the cries of seagulls and the rhythmic clink of metal against the yacht masts.

As it gets dark, I get up to switch on the balcony lights so she can continue reading. Without looking up she utters a soft thank you under her breath. I feel of some use, so I celebrate by ordering another cold beer. I notice to my right a man drinking tea. He's wearing a white French beret and red glasses, and he has his trombone for company, resting idly on the table. Perhaps he just found out the rest of the band can't make it so now he's drinking and thinking, like me.

The woman with the book gets up and waves goodbye to the man in the beret. How wonderful she was. I miss her already. The chap with the trombone, it transpires, is German, and he was meant to play with her tonight. His name is Manfred and he

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speaks broken English. My German is appalling so there is not much of a conversation between us. He offers me a cigarette.

Then he says, in his broken English: 'Not gut, bad vir country, bad vir music.'

'Bad, yah.' I feel an absolute fool saying yah, but it seems right.

'You music play?'

'Eich bin ein artist.' Now I really feel foolish, attempting to speak German.

'Paint?'

'Yah.'

'Paint problem, you must paint problem.'

'Yah.'

'First District Six, zen Kalk Bay, now Simon's Town.' He shakes his head. 'Not gut.'

I shake my head too. I think he's as bored of this conversation as I am, as we cannot communicate properly.

'You know lady?' I ask and point to the chair she sat on.

'Gut singer. Very gut. Her brothers gut music too.'

So she must have come to share the news that the band were unable to play. No wonder she never said a word.

'Okay I go. Gute nacht.' He gets up and shakes my hand.

I get up from my chair.

'Gute nacht.'

I'm the last on the balcony. Staring out at the dockyard I think of all those dockyard workers who've lost their jobs overnight.

I think about what Harry told me: that the African population in Simon's Town lived mostly in shacks against the mountains above Long Beach, in a location

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called Luyola and they were the first to be moved in the space of two weeks in the spring of 1965 to a place called Gugulethu, forty kilometres from Simon's Town. Harry said the name Luyola meant 'place of happiness' – what a terrible irony. These men delivered Simon's Town's milk, waited in hotels, removed sand that piled up on the railway lines, fought bushfires and kept the town clean, and now they have been chased out of the town ridiculously far from where they work. It's madness.

I pick up the *Cape Times* and turn straight to the editorial. I'm impressed that it takes a hard line against the government. It says, 'Only a supreme delusion of being absolutely right can make one group of human beings do these things to one another – and history has shown us the sorry ends of so many who have suffered under such a delusion.' Then the editor reminds us of Mr Vorster's speech at Windhoek: 'You must not try take a man's home away from him. You must not think that you will go unpunished, if you estrange a man's fatherland from him.' How ironic. I ask the bar lady if she still has yesterday's *Cape Argus*.

'I always keep yesterday's paper for the crosswords. Another beer?'

'Thanks.'

There's an announcement of a public protest scheduled at Jubilee Square in four days' time, that must be why Sylvia is in Cape Town. I find a letter from Barbara Wilks, the chairman of the Black Sash, which says that during the public inquiries in August 1959 and February 1965, not one person came forward to object against any racial group living in Simon's Town. Then I discover that the mayor of Simon's Town in 1962 wrote to the Minister of Community Development to implore that the ministry reconsider its position with regards the Group Areas Amendment Bill, and yet nothing, and now this.

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The bar lady and I chat and she tells me that a father of one of her staff, very elderly and blind, was moved from Red Hill to Slangkop yesterday.

'He's heartbroken. How can they move an old blind man, what threat is he to national security?'

She says that many residents agreed to move purely because they were hoping it would mean they'd have first choice of the best accommodation in the locations.

'But most homeowners are staying put until they're forced to move,' she adds.

'I can't believe the corner cafes and shops have just about all closed,' I say.

'They had to sell their shops, and quickly. But I've heard some of the Indian shops will be allowed to open again. They're clever because they quickly transferred the shops from their father's names into their names and the government has allowed it because India is making noises.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Everyone comes to drink here, everyone, and more recently especially the government officials.'

'I really feel for the fishermen, they must be the worst off.'

'Transport is their biggest problem because there's only one bus and that takes you to Fish Hoek. The fishermen have to take the last bus at 8 pm and then they just have to sit it out and wait for the train back to Simon's Town at 4 am.'

I shake my head.

'It seems so quiet here tonight, where is everybody?'

'No one pitched for work today except Mavis our cook and she had to leave early to get home before dark. She told me she and the rest of the kitchen staff may have to try find new jobs closer to where they live because now she is living in

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Slangkop she has to pay more for transport to bus to get to Simon's Town than what it costs from Glencairn to Cape Town by rail.'

'That's appalling. Where exactly is this place?'

'It's near Kommetjie. It's part of the farm called Imhoff's Gift, owned by the Van Der Horst family. It's the place where all the coloured people are being moved too, not only the coloured people of Simon's Town, also those in Noordhoek, Kommetjie and Witsands.'

'Did she tell you what it's like?'

'No view, she said. She misses False Bay, and she mentioned missing the fynbos. And the closest beach, she says, is miles away, and the sea there is ice cold compared to Muizenberg. She says we're so lucky to stay behind with our beaches and the warm sea, she says now the people are calling Simon's Town a rich man's paradise,'

'Didn't she move together with friends or family?'

'She didn't have a choice, the lorries from the dockyard herded the people in like cattle. Her friends and family got sent to Lavender Hill and because it was full she had to go to Slangkop or Slangies as they're calling it. She and the old blind man were the first people to settle there. She said she felt so lonely she went to visit the blind man but he's so confused and so depressed so she went to visit her family and friends in Lavender Hill and she said that too was terrible.'

'What was terrible about it?'

'The people there don't greet you or shake hands. If you ask them for directions, they offer you the knife. She says you have to watch out because if someone comes up to you asking for a loose cigarette and you don't have one, they'll

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knife you. I gave her a packet of my Cameo Lights so she can offer them out when she visits again.'

'Cameo Lights. Let's hope they accept Cameo Lights!'

'I know I thought about that afterwards, but that's all I smoke.'

'I hope she makes friends with her neighbours where she's living.'

'As I said, there are no neighbours where she is, it's just her and the blind man, but I'm sure more people will move there as she said she's surrounded by empty houses. It sounds like it's a new housing estate. I feel sorry for her, she said she feels like she's lost in the wilderness and they wouldn't even let her take her dog with her. That's her there, little Amy.'

At the sound of her name, the little bundle of fur that was sleeping under the chair gets up and greets the bar lady and me with a friendly wag.

'Mavis should get her dog back for company. When you see her again, could you kindly get directions? I'd be happy to go visit her and take Amy.'

'That's sweet of you, but she asked me to take care of Amy for a few weeks until she decides if she will move again. She's not keen on Lavender Hill – but whether she moves or not, she'll come fetch Amy.'

I must tell Sylvia about the blind old man, maybe we can go visit him, or perhaps the Black Sash can help.

'I'm glad the Black Sash are doing such a great job,' I tell the bar lady.

'They are. I overheard a lady from the Black Sash say their morning market raised about R3 000 and a sable stole fetched R200.'

'That's incredible. I could donate some artworks of Simon's Town, as I don't have any fur in my cupboards.'

We laugh.

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'Did they say exactly what the funds raised would be used for?'

'They have big plans. The Black Sash, through the Young Wives of Fish Hoek, has already organised lift clubs to help the pensioners with their monthly shopping, as there are no shops where they are. They're also arranging transport to get the pensioners to the Fish Hoek Post Office to collect their pensions. And they want to create youth clubs and organise films and a mobile library, and raise funds for a clinic. They say there is nothing where the people have been sent, absolutely nothing.'

'The Black Sash, is it only for women?'

'I think so. Why, do you want to join?' she chuckles.

'Well I want to do something, and they sound terribly well organised.'

'Have you heard that the Methodist School at Red Hill has been closed and the school furniture was removed by the Coloured Affairs Department, without even notifying the principal?'

'Wow it just doesn't stop, any good news?'

'Yeah. Cold beer on the house before we close.'

'That sounds great. My name is Nigel, by the way. And you are?'

'Nancy. Pleased to meet you Nigel.' And we shake hands formally.

She wanders off and I pick up the newspaper to read that the Black Sash are planning to put up a plaque of remembrance. 'This plaque will commemorate the citizens of Simon's Town who dwelt here for over 150 years in peace and harmony with their white neighbours until removed by Government edict.'

I wonder if the plaque will ever be allowed to be put up?

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Chapter 5

It's still dark when I'm woken by the singing of a Natal Robin outside the window.

'How long will it sing?'

'Until it's light,' grumbles Tommy, grabbing his pillow and placing it over his head.

'The robin or the sky?'

He pulls the pillow away from his face and glares at me. 'What?'

I don't answer. I can tell he isn't in the mood for my old games. I'm wide awake and I can't believe my brother arrived unannounced in Simon's Town the day before yesterday. I found him looking glum sitting on the stairs outside Harry's flat. After breaking the bad news that our father has had a stroke, he whisked me off on the next train via Bloemfontein back to Durban – and he hasn't stopped badgering me since. No wonder he's exhausted.

'He was devastated when you disappeared,' he laid into me.

'Disappeared?' I questioned. 'I left a note, and I wrote. I sent a postcard with Harry's address.'

'Okay, when you ran off like that.'

'I had to. Dad was being impossible, and I had to get my visa.'

'Why did you have to come all the way down here to Simon's Town to get a visa?'

'There was no point in going up to Pretoria's embassy or to the one in Port Elizabeth, so Cape Town made the most practical and economic sense. Anyhow, the ships for America leave from Cape Town harbour, not Pretoria.'

'So, did you get it then?'

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I don't answer. Kindly, he leaves it at that.

I can't believe I'm back in Durban so quickly, just like that. It feels like I was kidnapped, and we were in such a rush to catch the train that I only managed to scribble a quick goodbye note: 'Harry. Off to Durban, father ill, thanks for everything. Talk soon. Nigel.' I left him my Marvin Gaye cassette as a gift. I wanted to stop by Rattex and Mr Fahiem, to see if they had reopened, but my brother was in no mood for hanging about.

'Strange town,' he said that morning we left.

'What's strange about it?'

'Everyone's in uniform, it's like a police state. The Navy, they're everywhere.'

'It's a naval town Tommy, of course the Navy are everywhere.'

'I know that, but still I find it odd.'

'It's only odd because you haven't explored it. Most people drive right through to Cape Point. If we had time, I'd show you around.'

'Can we just get out of here?'

I feel a pang when we walk past Admiralty House. I greet the Navy officer. Will I ever get another chance to do Sylvia's portrait? I look past the gate into the gardens. I'll be back, I think, but I wonder if I really ever will.

'We're going to have to get dad a full-time nurse to keep an eye on him and you'll have to stay put for a while in Durban.' He places unnecessary emphasis on the words stay put, as if it was an order.

'I know, I know,' I nod, thinking there is no way I am staying put for long.

But I am in Durban now and the Natal Robin sings until it's light. I look out the window and even though the sun is out, there's gentle, light rain. I pull on a pair of jeans and a blue T-shirt and stride outside into Francois Road where I shelter

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myself under a giant Flamboyant tree. The swallows are back, dipping and diving. The road looks silver. I love how rain and light create silver. I've missed these monkeys' weddings.

I feel compelled to paint this light. I return to the house and without even having a shower or brushing my teeth I grab my paints and sketch book, sit under the Flamboyant tree and paint until the light changes.

Later, at breakfast with my brothers, I watch my father painfully battling to chew. I pity him in this weakened state, although it's a relief he's no longer fierce – yet he still manages to look at me accusingly. He struggles to communicate, his speech is slurred and slow: 'Why *didsh* you *dishappear*?'

Clearly Tommy and my father have been talking. They say the same things.

'I had to apply for a visa in Cape Town.'

He looks at me blankly. He's been robbed of his bravado and his stature now he's lost so much weight.

'You remember, I showed you the letter I got from Norman Rockwell and I called you the day I left, to tell you I got a bursary to study art in America, and you weren't happy at all.'

My words appear to have little impact. They fall flat on the melamine floor and scuttle out into the garden.

'The letter, dad, remember? The letter from Norman Rockwell. We had a big argument about it.'

He shakes his head disapprovingly.

'You even said you'd never heard of him.'

Tommy throws me a disparaging look.

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His face twitches, his tone bordering on anger. I don't care how ill he is, I didn't disappear, and I left a note. Why is he doing this, showing me up in front of my brothers? Tommy looks out the window. Gerald, who hates confrontation, politely gets up and gently pads off into the hallway to grab a book. With light delicate steps he moves away from us to the front section of the house.

I excuse myself, retreating to my old bedroom, where I empty all the belongings from my bag, scrambling through everything, but I can't find the letter. What did I do with it? I rummage through my drawers and find an old sketchbook. I open it to find a few loose letters. I must have left it at Harry's in my rush to pack. What an idiot. I panic as that letter is the only thing I have to keep my dream alive. I'm so absorbed in my task, I don't notice Tommy standing at the door. As I'm sitting cross-legged, he crouches down on his haunches. Tommy is ten years older than me and he's already starting to look like dad.

'What are you doing?'

The room is a mess, papers and sketchbooks everywhere, all my belongings scattered on the wooden floor.

'Looking for that letter to show dad, he really seems to have lost his memory.'

'Forget about the letter. Nigel, before he had his stroke, I spoke to him at length and he was concerned by the way you were acting before you left for Cape Town. He said you holed yourself up in this room listening to the radio and doing who knows what, or you hung around the docks or you went out every night and came home like a roaring drunk.

'Rubbish,' I say, even though it's all perfectly true.

'I asked him if you two had had a fight, and he said no, but that one morning you just upped and left.'

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I get up, and he too stands up. Despite being much younger, at least I'm taller. I push past him and hurry outside into the garden to get some air. I glare at the empty swimming pool. The last time this pool was empty coincided with the terrible news about mom. I grab the hosepipe and turn the garden tap on full blast and chuck the hosepipe in the pool. Predictably it snakes about wildly. That, I think, staring at it, is exactly how I feel. Tommy comes outside with Gerald, still with book in hand. They stand protectively on either side of me and we stare at the pool and at the snaking hosepipe, and I'm certain we're all feeling the same thing.

'Should we make a fish braai for dad tonight, celebrate your return?' suggests Gerald in his soothing voice. I swear the guy is so chilled, he's half-asleep. He places a brotherly arm around me.

'Dad loves a fish braai,' he smiles.

'And he needs to eat soft food we can break up into bits. He's battling to swallow,' adds Tommy, as if I'm too stupid to have noticed.

'The doctor say if this isn't managed, and any food or liquid passes into his windpipe and lungs, it can result in chest infections, and we don't want him to catch pneumonia,' says Tommy, forever the practical one. He's the perfect son. And Gerald never argues. I'm definitely the black sheep of the family, as frankly I don't care if my father catches pneumonia.

'I'm going down to the fish market to buy some Dorado. Nigel, you want to come with?' asks Gerald.

'No, I'll stay here, you guys go. I'll keep an eye on dad.'

But it's the last thing I'll do and I say it simply to impress my brothers. Once they leave, I ring up James.

'James, it's Nigel, I'm back in Durban.'

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'Nigel! Great to hear from you. What are you doing back so soon?'

'Long story, you free tonight?'

'Sure. What do you have in mind?'

'Drinking, lots of drinking. Maybe even some crazy sex.'

James laughs. He knows it's not my style to talk about sex like he does.

'Troubadour?'

'Perfect. We're having a family fish braai early evening, come over earlier if you like?'

'Great, I'll do that.'

I sit on my old bed and attempt to sketch Sylvia from the photograph she gave me. My dad calls me from the kitchen. With a pained look in his eyes, he instructs:

'Wash.'

I have to bath him, he's paralysed down the left side of his body, frozen stiff. My father has become a child. I wheel him into the bathroom and we barely squeeze through the narrow door. I run a warm bath and sit on the toilet seat while the water fills up. Neither of us says a word. I slowly help him undress and sense his frustration. As I take off his socks, I'm aware of his stiff left foot, toes curled, never to uncurl or twitch again. I attempt a feeble smile, looking up at him biting my bottom lip. He looks down at me from those hooded grey brows, and his restless, intelligent eyes bore straight through me.

His mouth opens, he wants to say something, but this time he can't. I take his right hand and hold it. He squeezes mine, and I quickly pull away, I can't help myself. How can I love and hate someone in the same moment? I roughly undo his belt and pull off his pants, then his underpants. I place a hand towel on his lap while I take off

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his shirt. I lift him up under his arms into the bath and the towel falls off. He's lost weight, but he's no lightweight. It's definitely not as easy as I thought.

'Sorry. Let me try that again.'

'*Shokay*,' he attempts a strained smile, his eyes damp.

I put him carefully back in his wheelchair, take off my shoes and socks and roll up my pants. I reverse him out the bathroom and this time I turn the wheelchair around so his good side is closer to the bath. I step into the bath and heave him in, he helps as much as he can using his right arm but he's really no help at all. The relief on his face as he's finally submerged up to his chest in water is, I reluctantly admit, heart warming. I step out the bath, dry my feet and then wash his back, soaping it up more than one usually would, and as I wash it down I notice for the first time that he has a cluster of freckles in the small of his back. I can't help but think of Sylvia and wonder how she's doing in that massive Admiralty House. I think of her white-stockinged legs and her in that lovely olive green dress going up those stairs with the big sash window where the sunlight floods through, and then the shouting and all those people with their belongings being turfed onto the street. What a day.

I wash my dad under his arms and very briefly wash his neck, his chest and stomach. He takes the sponge from me and privately washes wherever he can reach. It's a strange experience and I don't really know where to rest my eyes. This whole experience makes me feel uncomfortable. How many sons ever get to bath their fathers, or anyone for that matter, unless they have a young child, yet here I am in this intimate act, bathing him? If only he would say something right now, even if he slurred. I wish I could say something but I have nothing to say. I wish I could find a good song in my head to help me get through this – but nothing, I'm stuck right here in the moment. I go through the motions as quickly as possible and he senses my

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discomfort. Irritably, he grabs the sponge from me. I leave him on his own and go to fetch the radio. I have to have some music to get me through this. Thank God they're playing something light, The Beatles' *Hey Jude.* I rinse him off in silence. I lug him out of the bath, seat him on a fresh towel on his wheelchair and pat him dry. I put on his blue nightgown and tie it in a loose knot at the waist. How did my father become so frail?

A moment passes before he says weakly, '*Thanksh.*' He braves a skittish smile.

I whistle falsely along with the radio, trying to be upbeat, even though I don't feel it, I wheel him into his bedroom and, thank God, I hear my brothers arrive. We must have been in that bathroom for more than half an hour.

James doesn't make it to our fish braai but calls to tell me he's at a private party somewhere up on the Berea. We put my father to bed early and I leave my brothers sitting around what's left of the fire and the empty pool.

Gerald drops me off at the party, in a house just above St Augustine's Hospital. James of course knows everyone and is good at introducing me. His social skills are effortless, whereas mine are not half as smooth. I find a quiet spot in the garden to sit by myself and watch the party while enjoying my third beer of the evening. I watch a tall woman with short dark hair laughing with James, then James points towards me and they walk in my direction.

'Nigel, meet Alice. Alice, this is my friend Nigel, just back from Cape Town.'

And off James disappears, as quickly as he arrived. There's an awkward silence for a moment. We smile politely. She has magnificent milky white skin, she's very, very beautiful. Her skin looks delicate, like fine, smooth eggshells, and what exquisite pale green eyes. She'd be great to draw.

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'Don't feel obliged to have to chat because James introduced us, he's forever introducing people,' I say rather unsociably.

She laughs. I laugh at myself for being so inept.

'How do you know James?'

'Do you really want to know?'

'Not really,' she giggles.

'You sound English.'

'I am.'

'How long have you been in the country?'

'Not long, a few months, I've just come down from Rhodesia.'

'What's Rhodesia like?'

'Wide streets, wide enough to take a span of oxen. And enormous houses with long, shallow steps, wrap-around verandas, and men striding about in the hot midday sun wearing khaki shorts and long beige socks.'

'Really, you make it sound fun. Like a cartoon strip.'

'Really?'

'Yes really. But what made you leave swinging London?'

'London may be swinging, but it is equally swingingly overcrowded. Travelling by tube was a nightmare, packed in like John West sardines, plus continual rain alternating with perennial drizzle, and the damp, then add the fog.'

'Fog. I couldn't imagine Durban with fog.'

'I loathed the fog, it got so thick in winter that a policeman had to walk in front of the bus with a torch. I often got lost returning home. I couldn't see the number of my house for the thick mist. Often I landed up at someone else's front door, peering through the window to see if I could recognise anything, my nose pressed against the

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glass, eyes squinting. 'Is that Mum's umbrella? Is that our couch?' She scrunches up her nose.

Mmm, she's really nice, wonderfully engaging, definitely not the type of woman who relies on her beauty. Her glass is nearly empty; maybe I should offer her another drink.

'Did you come by ship?'

'Is there any other way to travel?' she asks cheekily. 'But don't ask me, ask Cecil John Rhodes, Harry Oppenheimer, Sir Laurens van der Post…'

'Harold Macmillan and Rudyard Kipling.' We smile.

'Have you heard about the Countess of Athlone?' but she doesn't let me answer, 'terribly spoilt, travels round the world continually. She so loves the indolent life of being on board ship, she never gets off. And I met passengers who book the same cabin, on the same ship, on the exact same voyage, year after year!'

'Really?' Oh God I'm sounding like a buffoon, don't challenge her, agree with her. What am I thinking? I hate meeting people who always agree with me, that's so boring, you never learn a thing.

'May I get you another drink?'

'Yes please, gin and tonic, single.' And did she just wink at me as she said the word single? How wonderfully sly.

'And lots of ice.'

I take her glass and head for the bar. Why am I feeling so unsure of myself? Sure she's gorgeous, but so what, there are plenty of pretty girls here tonight. But she does have such fantastic spark.

I return with her drink, armed with fresh questions.

'Did you come out on the Athlone Castle?'

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'I did indeed.'

'I've never travelled by ship, what's it like?'

'Blissful, time is spliced by the rising and setting sun, and the chiming of bells.'

I smile at her and she smiles back.

'I loved evenings best when bells would summons us for dinner. An orchestra and a fanciful frock-coated waiter greeted First Class passengers and even if you travelled second class, you had to arrive in full evening dress.'

'Was there always music and dancing after dinner?'

'Every night. After dinner the quarterdeck was cleared for dancing. A fabulous theatrical group sang around the piano in their smart London clothes, smoking cigarettes with black filters, real city girls sipping ginger squares. One night I finally got up the nerve to join them and I had such a glorious time. I learnt the foxtrot under those swinging lamps and drank martinis from red glasses. Lights out was ridiculously early at 10.30 pm, all the cabin lights were slowly dimmed in one dramatic sweep across the entire ship.'

'Sounds incredible, why would anyone ever want to get off?'

'Exactly. It's a marvellous feeling being on a ship, you can be anyone and do anything. It's like floating on a lilo in a pool with your eyes closed – you don't feel a care in the world. There's a timeless sense, no beginning, no end. Everything gets taken care of – your social life, meals, after-dinner drinks, the bed linen, the dishes, everything you could possibly think of. They even fill your bath!'

I love the way she speaks, in long flowing sentences. She's really confident.

'Did you meet interesting people?'

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'There was one chap, Graham,' her eyes bat at the memory, large green eyes full of excitement. 'He was part of the theatrical set. I enjoyed many late nightcaps with him. I was absolutely thrilled at the prospect that he fancied me. I'm typically Gemini,' she laughs at herself and dramatically places a hand on her chest, 'which made him the perfect audience for me, as you can tell, I'm gabbling away talking far too much about myself.'

I smile. I don't care, all that is going through my mind is, who is this woman and is she really single? James you beauty, I owe you.

'And one still evening sitting on the deck, sipping Pimm's with a bunch of other young English travellers, I was cloistered rather intimately with Graham. He was tall like you, but blonde, rakish good looks, absolutely charming with a wonderful sharp wit.'

I start to feel slightly jealous, which is ridiculous of course.

'But I noticed Graham was making serious eye contact with someone else. My face started to burn, I could feel myself going all red and blotchy from sheer humiliation. You know that feeling?'

I nod, associating that feeling with my father.

'It was clear something was going on. It was a real Lauren Bacall moment,' she laughs, 'so in keeping with the spirit of being on board a ship, I threw my drink at him. I think it was gin. It was most effective, I got his instant attention. Then in front of everyone he unceremoniously blurted out, 'Yes, I'm queer, okay?'

'Oh God,' I thought, 'another one down the drain.'

We laugh.

'You're not queer are you?'

'No,' I laugh. 'But if I were I'd hope you'd still want to be my friend.'

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'Of course. Cheers!' she says and we clink our classes together.

I'm absolutely bewitched.

'So then what did you do?'

She laughs. 'Well we didn't become friends, to tell the truth, and the next day I was already over him and brazenly found myself viciously flirting with the badminton instructor who wore these wonderfully oversized Hank Marvin glasses.' She laughs again and I'm not sure if she is telling me this for effect or if it really happened, but who cares, she's gorgeous and she's still talking to me.

'I heard that the route between Southampton and Cape Town is marked by a seabed of crockery and cutlery thrown overboard by scullery hands who've grown weary of the tedium of washing dishes. Is that true?'

'I heard that too! It must be true.'

'It must have been a huge culture shock when you arrived. What for you stood out the most about here, compared to living in England?'

'The landscape. My first impression was that it was very dry, like straw. And the more wide space I saw, the more everything in England suddenly seemed so small. And the heat, it's like being in a giant dryer. I love it. At first I couldn't get over the fierce heat, my skin felt different, my face was always flushed, and my hair got wilder, so I just cut it short.'

'It looks good short.'

'Thank you Nigel.'

It feels wonderful to hear her say my name. I feel a bit forward saying hers, but hell, why not.

'My pleasure Alice.' And we beam at each other like fools.

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'The food was a new experience, like your avocado pear. We don't get that in England. I thought it was a type of pear, so I was expecting something sweet. I spat it out because it tasted like soap, but now I've got used to the taste, I can't get enough of them. I love that they grow wild on trees like so much other fruit like paw-paws and bananas. And I recently had gem squash for the first time,' she says wide-eyed as if she'd just discovered Mars, 'now that I really like because of the wonderful texture. It's a lovely soft vegetable, warm and comforting. I love that the butter melts so easily into the halves.'

She is so sweet, I think, and catch myself from staring dreamily at her like a lovesick fool.

'How long did you stay in Rhodesia?'

'About eight months.'

'What are your plans now?'

'I have no plans, absolutely no plans at all and it feels wonderful.' She smiles and I can see how free she feels, I'm slightly envious. Actually, I'm tremendously envious.

'And you, Nigel, what about you?'

I tell her my story and find myself strangely telling her the truth, about my dad being ill, and my dream to become a professional artist. She nods, smiling throughout, like she understands. But then she says something that jars.

'Artists don't make much money though, doesn't that worry you?'

I'm not sure how to answer this. It hits me in my stomach. Everything was going so well until she says this.

I give a nervous laugh. She's no fool and picks up from my awkward laughter that her comment was insensitive.

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'Nigel, I'm so sorry, that was a cruel thing to say. Please forgive me,' and her hand brushes mine just for a moment.

The blood runs back through my body. I'm so relieved she apologised. If she hadn't apologised so sweetly I would have offered to get her another drink and instead left the party, hoping never to see her again.

Before I leave I ask her to join me for a modest picnic lunch at the Botanical Gardens the next day and she accepts. Thank God! I'm thrilled. Things are looking up at last. Sod America, I think I'm falling in love.

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Chapter 6

A noisy flock of hadedas flies overhead to settle down in a giant mango tree. I'm in the Botanical Gardens with Alice. She has graciously offered to make us a picnic, and what a spread; very Mediterranean, with olives, taramasalata, dolmades, tsatsiki, fresh baguette, a selection of cheeses, some grapes and fresh orange juice.

She looks fantastic. She's wearing a fresh cotton dress in lilac that gathers at her tiny waist, innocent, very fetching.

'You never told me last night if you caught the train straight to Rhodesia from the harbour?' I ask, pouring the fresh juice.

'I did catch the train the same day I arrived and it took three days by rail to Bulawayo. But the best moment was arriving in Table Bay, when all the ships hooted loudly announcing our arrival and we all stood out on deck. I was so happy to be in a warm, sunny climate at last. There was a huge crowd at the docks. I saw Table Mountain for the first time, loved those great avalanche mists.'

'But what made you leap on a ship bound for Africa in the first place?'

'What makes you want to study art in America? You know adventure and for me anything was better than working at Butlins holiday camp in boring Filey in Yorkshire. Imagine spending your summer doing star jumps! I was a Red Coat and I took the morning and afternoon physical exercise classes in my white sporty shorts.'

Alice in shorty shorts. Mmm, after lunch I may just have to ask her to join me for a game of tennis.

'You had to have a bit of personality to work at Butlins. A lot of the staff are "resting" actors. They don't just take anyone,' she says, mock sarcasm flashing in her beautiful green eyes.

'And why Butlins?'

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'Because at night there was ballroom duty where you could drink loads of complimentary G&Ts and dance to *But I only have eyes for you.*' She sings it; she hasn't got a great singing voice but she's absolutely charming and bristling with a life energy I haven't come across in anyone before. I'm totally bewitched.

'Okay, to be honest, I had no idea I would be dancing with postmen, clerks and plumbers. I'd been dreaming of dancing with the toffs, who I hoped would kidnap me to glamorous Le Touquet in the South of France. Or sweep me off my perfect feet and take me to Kenya or Madagascar or somewhere suitably exotic. I could honestly do without being kidnapped and taken to Croydon.'

We laugh. We laugh a lot together, it feels good.

'But why did you choose Rhodesia and not first explore South Africa?'

'A friend told me about these Saturday afternoon talks in an old Georgian residence in a pretty square in central London. I was curious so I went along and afterwards they showed clips from a TV programme about an adventurous couple warding off hippos and buffalo. It was a dramatic Rhodesian travelogue presented by a very glamorous couple dressed in khaki.'

'So the glamour of khaki did it for you?' I stifle a laugh.

'You want the truth?'

I reach out to tickle her around her waist and succeed and boy is she ticklish.

'Okay, okay stop please stop,' she giggles. 'Stop and I'll tell you the truth.'

And she tells me: 'I'm a fickle fashion goddess who came to Africa because I saw footage of girls dressed in white 1950s dresses with wide stiffened petticoats walking through wild jungle gardens. I wanted that to be me.'

She stares at me with a serious expression and I think, what is going on here? Then she breaks into a wide smile. She has beautiful dimples.

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'Oh don't be a fool, I'm kidding. I really just wanted to swim without a swimming cap in an open-air Olympic-sized swimming pool. And I secretly always knew the only way to escape was by swopping continents, and Africa is really far more interesting than the South of France could ever be.'

'Well I feel so boring compared to you, I've never been abroad.'

'You're not missing much. Just look around you at this wonderful sense of space,' says she, as if she has travelled the entire continent and can rightly and authoritatively compare.

'I've seen pictures of Kew Gardens, missy, and it looks almost identical to this,' I tease.

'Hardly mister, this is mini-town compared to Kew! And all your buildings are single storey, and in Rhodesia men really do wear long socks, and they really do stride up the stairs two at a time…' She laughs a soft feminine laugh and, knowing she is talking too much, charmingly puts her hand to her mouth, just like Sylvia did.

'I'd still like to travel. Was the ship passage costly, if I may ask?'

'Fortunately not as my passage was subsidised by the English government, they really are trying to encourage young English people to settle in Africa.'

'You lucky thing.'

'*You* lucky thing, you got to meet me!'

'Oh yeah, and you think you're already a hit with me, hey!' and I tickle her again and she squeals.

An elderly couple walk past and smile.

'Did you have a boyfriend in Rhodesia, or should I say do you still have a boyfriend in Rhodesia?'

'I had a girlfriend in Rhodesia. Two actually.'

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'What?' I tickle her again and this time she manages to wrestle one arm and tickle me back. I scream as I'm ticklish as hell.

'Aiiiii!'

We eventually stop as we're wet with tears from laughing so much.

'Ah, that was great' she beams, her hair now a mess but she looks even better now, relaxed, her face slightly red and flushed. Wow, she's gorgeous. I just love her skin. I'm compelled to kiss her but think I won't push it too far too soon.

'I meant I had two girlfriends, not as in sleeping with them as girlfriends, you banana head!'

'Banana head?'

'Yes, Mr Banana Head.'

'Where did I find you?'

'At a Seffrican braai,' she chortles mimicking my flat South African accent.

'Now, young lady, where did you stay in Rhodesia? I think I may need to visit and inspect the premises and find out exactly what you got up to.'

She folds her knees under her dress and proceeds to tell:

'I stayed in a beautiful double-storey mansion called Rhodesia House in Salisbury. It had an enormous wraparound veranda and a massive garden. It was connected to a large private house where the local waiters wore white gloves and starched white uniforms with navy-blue sashes. Very fancy.'

'What did you do all day?'

'Not much but laze about really, entire afternoons with our feet up on the veranda, chatting, reading, or writing long letters home. I loved nothing better than swimming, paddling about and then sitting with my evening drink dipping my feet in the cool pool. And there were outdoor bars where we could drink at night under the

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stars. I felt like I was in paradise. It's how I'd always imagined Lotus Land. I don't think you can understand what bliss it was after the cold of England. What a privilege to be able to swim outdoors every day. And my arms and legs turned from a deathly white to a soft cinnamon from all the lovely sun.'

'But I love deathly white,' and I brush the back of my hand along her arm, such soft porcelain skin.

'I had to go back to being pale as my skin kept peeling. I'm just sooo sensitive,' she jokes in a funny French accent, laughing at herself.

'Did you visit Victoria Falls?'

'Yes,' and her face lights up.

'I can't believe I haven't even been yet and it's in my neighbouring country.'

'Oh Nigel, you must go see it, it's absolutely breathtaking. They take you on a boat and you get sopping wet. The mist from the giant waterfalls is heavenly. It's where I bought a small African tom-tom, maybe you can teach me? And I bought these African beads,' she pulls them out like prized pearls hidden under the high neckline of her dress. They're simple red lucky beans strung together with string.

'Aren't they lovely?'

'They are.' I want to say, and so are you, but I'm not a complete lovesick fool and suitably I restrain myself.

'I sent an exquisitely detailed carved balsa wood African mask back to my mum. I hope she liked it. And I went to the game parks. We saw masses of game at Wankie and even ran into a herd of elephants. I have never been so scared – it's not like the zoo. They looked quite fierce. We weren't even allowed out of the car.'

Just then, and most maddeningly, James arrives, his guitar slung over his shoulders. I forgot he loves to come here and sit for hours jamming under a tree.

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'Hello lovebirds. My, that was quick! And do you know, you two have been chatting non-stop? I was just over there playing guitar and I see you are not interested in other people at all.'

'No,' we chorus and both laugh.

Alice gets up to give James with a warm hug. She's naturally affectionate too; great.

'Okay, you can bugger off now James, shoo-shoo!' and she mock flicks her dress at James as if he were a dangerous bull.

'I'm outta here' he laughs, and waltzes off.

'He's such a cool cat,' says Alice

'Aren't most musicians'?'

'And artists.'

'Aw thanks Alice for the token praise, you're all heart.'

'I am actually, bursting with love and sentiment, melancholy and heartache. Take your pick!'

We tuck into our picnic and polish off the delicious snacks, but the cheeses have melted terribly because of the intense heat, despite the fact that we're sitting under a big bottlebrush tree.

'Can you speak African?' asks Alice.

'It's Zulu, no I don't speak Zulu, but I can get by with the basics. Hello is Sawubona.'

'Sirbona,' she attempts.

'Sawubona,' I repeat slower this time.

'Sawubona,' she gets it right the second time.

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'Very good. So have you been a good tourist taking lots of photographs?' I tease.

'I have. I've been fantastically good. Especially when I first got here, but not so much now. I photographed African women carrying pots on their heads, but some South African girls in Rhodesia chided me saying: "Why do you want to photograph the munts, you'll see plenty of them, they're everywhere." They were so rude. Is that what they call the local people here, "munts"? No one could tell me exactly what it means.'

'It's short for muntu.'

'But what does it mean?'

'You know, I have no idea, but I'm certain it's derogatory.'

'I think so too, especially by the way those girls turned up their snotty noses when they chided me for taking those pictures. You know, when I arrived in Salisbury I witnessed a disturbing incident. A burly white man with long socks crossed the road, and a child of about twelve, a black child, got in the way, so the man cuffed him. I was so shocked by his behaviour, I shouted at him. He gave me the filthiest look.'

'White Rhodesians are like that, most of them anyhow, and in South Africa it's just as bad.'

'In Rhodesia I was told that it's best to ignore the locals as we have nothing in common with them. Do you think that is true?'

'Not at all, and anyway what they don't know is that some of their and our best musicians and artists are black. You like music?'

'I love dancing. I went to an eye-opening drumming ceremony just outside Salisbury and when I told a girl who had been staying at Rhodesia House that I danced all night at a drumming ceremony and that next time she should join me she

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snapped, "It's just not done." But it was wonderful. I danced my socks off, I told her, and still she wasn't interested.

'Some people are limited, just focus on the good.'

'Good grief, Nigel, I mean Pastor Nigel. Do go on.'

I grin like a fool and she grins back.

'How did you get to hear about the drumming ceremony? Usually you have to be invited.'

'I saw all these chickens cooped up in cages so I said to the young man sitting nearest the chickens, "You can't do that! That's terribly cruel." He didn't even blink never mind respond. Then an African woman who spoke great English explained he didn't understand what I was saying and that a lot of African people don't speak English, but then she joked that neither do the English speak much Shona or Shangaan! We laughed and then she suggested I join her as she was on her way to a drumming ceremony, so I went along. I'll show you the pictures if you're interested.'

'I am, definitely.' I am very interested in you, adventurous Alice.

'I did at first find the South African girls very different to the English girls,' says Alice. 'They're terribly spoilt and somewhat, dare I say it, cruel. Especially the ones I met that lived on farms and studied in Bulawayo. At Rhodes House it was mainly English girls, very respectable.'

'What made you leave Rhodesia?'

'It's a beautiful place but I couldn't stay much longer hanging out with only English folk and it actually became a bit embarrassing that we just sat around doing nothing most of the day as if we were royalty in our fancy white London dresses, lazing about while staff served us tea. Or we played tennis all day and ate sliced melons or oranges served on fancy white china on these huge silver trays. The staff

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waited on us constantly, always forcing us to drink another G&T, which I do love I have to admit, and they say they're very good to stop mosquito bites.' She breaks out into laughter and offers me her empty glass for another glass of juice.

Alice and I kiss later that afternoon. It is a soft, sensual, slow kiss. She's very erotic. We sit gazing at the sacred ibis birds nesting in a half submerged tree in the lake.

'They look like giant snowflakes,' says Alice, nestling her head on my lap. By now we are sprawled out, all arms and legs, at ease with our newfound intimacy. We chat away until the sun sets and then discover we have been locked in to the park, so we clamber over the gates to get out. She has plans to go up the north coast with friends to explore the beaches and go bird-watching at St Lucia near Richard's Bay, so I arrange to meet her in a fortnight. My mom would have loved Alice.

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Chapter 7

Alice reckons I'm a people-pleaser. Am I really? She jokes that I live like Walter Mitty in Never-Never Land, where they play damn good jazz, drink the best single malt, and, of course, there is no such vile thing as money. Yes, that does sound rather like me.

I'm enjoying a late-night whiskey as I gaze out at the balmy night. Alice has already gone to bed. It's hard not to be seduced by this city's tropical warmth, I can see why Alice is reluctant to leave, and then there's me of course. I snigger at the thought. It is truly one of those spectacular sultry Durban nights when you can feel the whole town sweat. The crickets are buzzing, bullfrogs are croaking, a bat flies under the dim light of a neighbour's porch, everything feels so alive. The Delicious Monsters are creeping up the mango trees, the giant ferns are cascading down the balconies, giant avocados drop, plop, there's one right now, kapow, it splits open onto the warm tarmac.

We stay in a flat just off Venice Road in Morningside. It's small but it's perfect for us. Ah, life is good right now, I have an exhibition at the African Art Centre and Alice has a part-time job doing research at IDASA, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa.

I wake up late the next day and Alice has already gone to work. I wash and take a stroll up the hill to Mitchell Park's tea garden. I stop off at the corner cafe to buy the Natal Mercury to read the arts section with my coffee, as I always do, but this time I'm anxious to read it when I sit down as I'm expecting my review. I take a sip of filter coffee and brace myself as I turn the page. But there's no review on my exhibition, only a very brief one on Tito Zungu, despite the fact that his exhibition is already over. Typical, and it's not even a well-written review by the sound of the first

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paragraph, it's very factual and staccato with an unimaginative headline: 'Ballpoint pen artist'. It reads:

'Artist Tito Zungu had been working in Durban for many years, primarily as a cook at Catholic institutions. He had begun drawing as a teenager and in 1960 started decorating envelopes, which he sold in the market place to migrant workers sending letters home to their families in the country. I asked him how he did his fine line-dot decorations, and he immediately sat down and did a simple version, using the back of his comb as a ruler.

'At the opening of his exhibition he had a beaded comb in his hair, several thick beaded neckbands and an elegant beaded stick. He was completely at ease and could have been at a fashionable exhibition in Paris or London.'

The journalist quotes a Professor Pancho Guedes – which is just as well, as clearly this journalist has nothing to say about Zungu's art, so these quotes really save the piece: 'Zungu's pictures are unique and original. There are two kinds of art, the cooked and the raw; the pastiche and the original. The cooked kind is made through forced feeding at art schools; it rifles the baggage that others have already carried; it hides its head in the sands of techniques; it progresses incessantly by eating its own tail; it fills the galleries of the world with comfortable reproductions. Raw art is the art of authentic artists who have a compulsive need to communicate their own visions; it does not get around on crutches. Tito Zungu's art is bright and joyful - startling and raw. Tito does not paint his pictures - he draws and writes them, more like an architect than a painter. His semi-detached palaces, his skyscrapers, his rare and complex low-rise office buildings make up an enchanted and colourful city. He is South Africa's most original artist.'

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Actually I take back what I said before, now it's a great review, lucky sod. I page through the rest of the newspaper but nothing else interests me.

I guess my review will come sometime next week. I wonder what the art critics will think of my Simon's Town charcoal drawings of the evictions? Ah well, today it's a seagull's life for sure. And I like Mitchell Park, I like that I can sit here for hours and daydream and that even the squawking Indian mynahs are a familiar comfort. I watch a pair fighting over crumbs of a scone that have fallen under a bench. These birds are aggressive as all hell, wings flapping wildly, their beaks wide open like giant tweezers. Then an extraordinary thing happens, the two birds get entangled with one another and, most alarmingly, their feet interlock, they're stuck. I stifle a laugh. It's a ridiculous sight as they are now forced to lie side by uncomfortable side, glaring at one another. They thrash madly against the floor trying desperately to break free. My waiter and I are not the only people watching and laughing at this spectacle; I see another waiter walking out with a strawberry milkshake, he stops and watches, equally amused. He waves his hand at the birds as if such a gentle action would miraculously pry them apart. Their black beady eyes shift direction to lock onto the waiter. He shakes his head and walks off to deliver the milkshake to a child. The waiter returns, crouches down and attempts to unlock their feet but the birds peck at him viciously and startled he leaps up.

'Ayor!' he shouts and runs off up the stairs into the restaurant, no doubt to rub it with ice. I pull out my sketchbook. They're perfect subjects to sketch as they're so exhausted now, lying side by still side, their beaks still open, frozen in shock. A few minutes later another waiter with a commanding presence bolts down the stairs shouting at the birds as he mock charges them and then, surprisingly, delivers a rude kick that sends them cartwheeling through the air like circus acrobats. Their feet are

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still locked together, their wings flapping wildly then, as they're about to hit the floor, their tangled grip is released and they fly off in opposite directions. Alice would have loved to witness such an amusing spectacle.

I don't order any breakfast; I'm living off Alice's salary for now as I'm battling making a living being an artist. Unlike me she sure has a grip on things, especially financially. But I met another artist called Manfred who lives in Red Hill, and he's really doing well. He makes these fantastic woodcuts and large-scale drawings and paintings of fat security cops, apartheid army generals and parliamentarians. He recently exhibited in an old Anglican church where he invited the public to paint over his artworks. I drew a pig's head on the head of a painting of an army general. He loved that. He even had a reggae band playing so people started dancing in the church and then they all painted over the drawings. Terrific idea, wish I had thought of something as clever as that for my exhibition, except the police did a raid and the paintings were confiscated. Manfred and all of us were furious. They even threatened to put some of us in jail. Jerks.

When I'm not drawing or painting, Alice and I have fun doing puzzles on our balcony. She chooses ridiculously ambitious puzzles with loads of blue sky and mountains. The hardest are the puzzles of giant killer whales. Doing puzzles keeps me absorbed the same way drawing does. I do enjoy the childlike delight of searching for the right puzzle when it's my turn to choose, I guess like I would when selecting the right colour paint, and I love the patience of it. The gentle process calms my mind and reminds me so much of my first love, sitting somewhere quiet, painting or drawing.

The thing with puzzles, though, is that the picture always ends up looking like the picture on the box. There's no way of creating a different ending. Instinctively, I want to change things as I can with painting, by mixing new colours of paint,

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changing the style of the brush stroke, moving something or perhaps erasing it, playing with the design. What frustrates me most is being unable to paint over the puzzle and start again. I have to accept that when it's done, it's done; there is no mystery or magic. I have to keep reminding myself that in the end the puzzle, whether it's of the Great Karoo or the Valley of a Thousand Hills, will always end up looking like the picture on the box.

I guess it boils down to not having creative control over the process, as for me it's not about the final result, although that is rewarding, like exhibiting, it's the process of painting that interests me. It's just a simple puzzle, I guess. Perhaps I should attempt to make a creative puzzle for Alice's birthday. My father's birthday is also coming up soon. His condition is worsening and I don't see him much and to be honest I don't miss him – but my mother, how I miss her.

I loved to watch her sitting in the kitchen having her late afternoon tea and listening to talk radio. My father no longer listens to the radio, and when she died he even stopped playing chess. We used to play chess together and she'd watch. Childlike, she'd whisper into my ear, giving me tips on how to beat my father. 'Protect your queen, Nigel. Move your knight.'

'Let him be, let him be,' my father would thunder.

She'd slip me a homemade shortbread biscuit under the table when my father wasn't looking and I'd eat it quickly. We'd share private smiles that my father could never penetrate.

'What are you both smiling at?' he'd ask, knowing something was up and, I like to think, enjoying that he didn't know.

My mom would respond with a smile. When she sat down with a fresh pot of tea she'd joke, 'Nigel, you have something behind your…' and she'd magically

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remove a white sugar lump from behind my ear. 'There,' she'd smile and plop it into my tea, and I'd watch it magically dissolve.

It was a joy to come home after school, see her sitting reading a book in our sun-filled kitchen. On Fridays she would give me an after-school treat, a glass of creamy milk or a handful of butterscotch sweets, then we'd walk down Francois Road with our binoculars just before the sun set, hand in swinging hand, and she'd point out the names of the birds.

'Look Nigel, there in that Flamboyant is a Green Coucal. Can you see it?'

I still have that bird book she gave me for my twelfth birthday, with her beautiful neat handwriting in it.

My mom and I had long conversations about my future. I knew I wanted to be an artist even way back then. She was the one who suggested I write to someone famous one day and ask their advice about art colleges in America. Luckily I had read about Norman Rockwell in a newspaper and kept the article; years later I managed to successfully track down his address through a very helpful lady at the US Consulate – the irony. But I'm relieved I didn't go to America in the end as I would never have met Alice and I would have really struggled overseas. Here if you're an artist you can get by; modestly, but you can get by. The trick is to get selected by the Durban Art Gallery or the South African National Gallery. I do envy Manfred as he has great contacts internationally where he sells most of his work, especially in Germany. Tito Zingu I think is going to do really well and Azaria Mbatha, Sydney Khumalo, Lucas Sithole, Eric Ngcobo, Elliot Nyawo and Michael Zondi are enjoying successful exhibitions too.

I love the stark simplicity and the often humorous expressionism in the linocuts of John Muafangejo. They're now calling him the African Hockney. And I'm

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so pleased the director of the African Art Centre introduced me to Eric Ngcobo, now a member of the organising committee. He is a real mover in terms of art education at the Mzuvele School in Kwamashu where he was once principal. I'm going to his studio tomorrow and we get on so well; I do hope we become friends. Eric said at my opening he'd introduce me to other artists, like Andrew Verster, who reviews for the local newspapers. His reviews are superb, I like that he writes so honestly. He recently said that aspiring artists are stifled by the enthusiasm and indiscriminate, over-rich and uneducated public, gobbling up township art as a way of expiating guilt.

I'm about to leave when Mr Lewis, an old family friend, a loveable big-shot lawyer in a smart pinstriped suit with black shiny shoes, walks in. This man can drink like a fish. I was the one who went to his office to tell him mom had died. I wept like a baby. I'd never wept like that before. Mr Lewis stared at me from behind his desk for a long time and then he wrote me a cheque, which, strangely, comforted me greatly.

The Lewises lived half an hour's drive outside Durban, where visiting was like being in the country but without the cows and horses. They were our only family friends. It was at the Lewises' that we discovered the magic of a family Sunday lunch. We had long, lazy braais in their massive garden, each of us on our own sun-lounger spread like lizards around their pool, feeling like rich folk listening to the Top 40 on Springbok Radio, under the shade of the big lucky-bean tree. We ate like kings. Food was served in orange plastic camping plates divided into quarters, like pizza. We loved those plates; the beetroot never bled into the coleslaw, and you could separate your nyama and wors from the sliced bananas and paw-paw pieces. There was always a Catholic priest or two over for Sunday lunch.

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'Young and good looking,' mom would sigh, pouring another G&T, and she'd look over to my father and wink. 'Such a waste.'

The Lewises were a big family. They had seven children; three girls and four boys, and every single one later went on to university. One of the younger brothers got irritated with me one day as I was riding his bicycle around the garden. He pulled my hair so hard he removed an entire clump.

'Eina!' I remember screaming. As we were guests, I didn't dare say a thing.

'It shows good breeding,' my mom explained when I told her what happened that night as she tucked me in.

The Lewis family had two dogs, an Alsatian I affectionately referred to as an Old Station dog, and a scruffy Maltese with mangled tombstone teeth. The dogs only ever ate salad that was kept in blue Tupperwares in the fridge. There were always rabbits in the garden and a green pet snake called Alex that lived in a wooden box in the tool shed. They had rats in the ceiling that used to come out at night to 'dance', so they'd let Alex out to eat them.

And there was Aunt Peggy, tall and slender like a long green runner bean; she lived in a little house down at the bottom of the garden. Peggy Green Bean Fingers, we all called her; she made the Lewises' garden the envy of everyone who lived in Drummond.

Mr Lewis recognises me.

'Nigel, what a surprise! How are you, young man, and how is your father doing?'

'He's okay, he has a nurse and we visit often,' I lie, 'but it's difficult of course.'

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'Yes of course. I'm here for a meeting otherwise I'd join you for a chat. Please send my regards to your father and to your brothers.'

'Will do, great to see you Mr Lewis.'

'You too, Nigel.'

Wow, he's got rather portly. I get up to leave and after I've paid and I can't believe the time, it's nearly lunchtime and I'm starving. I head to Johnny's Chip 'n Ranch in Sparks Road to get a chicken roti, they make the best rotis in town. And then it's back to some new drawings this afternoon. I'm working on a new series of portraits I'm calling The Recyclers. It's portraits of working-class folk who collect bits of metal from old car wrecks, as well as wire, old bedsprings, old stoves and anything that can be sold in Umgeni Road for scrap. And there are cardboard collectors who collect masses of old cardboard boxes then dismantle them and stack them in high piles and take them to Brickhill Road to be sold for recycling. I've also heard some people collect tins and make beautiful tin sunflowers and toy cars in the locations. I'll need to go to KwaMashu or Umlazi to research that. I think it will be interesting to photograph the people and then make giant charcoal portraits. I'm really only interested in painting people.

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Chapter 8

I finally pluck up the courage to ask Alice to marry me. A few weeks later we are at the Holy Trinity Church in Musgrave Road with a few close friends and my brothers for a simple ceremony. After the service we head for drinks at The Tropicale in Albert Park, where James plays Leonard Cohen's beautifully morose *A thousand kisses deep* and afterwards I ask the owner to play my Oscar Peterson tape. Today Alice looks spectacular in a flowery blue silk dress, white gloves and a white hat. I'm wearing a dark suit I had especially made for me by Indian tailors in Grey Street, a simple white shirt and a classic striped red, blue and white tie. Unfortunately my father is too sick to attend but he sends us a beautiful bouquet of white roses.

I can't even remember the last time I saw him and it's only when I get a call from Tommy to say that he passed away the next morning am I racked with guilt. My father's death takes me right back to the death of my mother. Everything feels like it has come to a complete halt. When I woke up today I wasn't even bothered about brushing my teeth. Alice tries to cheer me up but I'm miserable as hell. She opens the bedroom curtains to let the sunlight flood in.

'Close the curtains!' I shout. Surprised by my own harsh tone, I apologise.

'Nigel, please eat something.' Alice offers me my favourite mashed banana on toast with honey, but I can't eat. 'You must try get out today, even if it's just for a ten-minute walk. Go say hello to our giant tortoises in Mitchell Park, watch the pink flamingos do yoga, just get out please.'

I'm stubborn and silent.

'Tonight I'm going to bake you a cake and you and I will sit on the balcony and listen to some of your favourite jazz and eat cake. Chocolate cake fine for you, sir?'

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What I really want is a crate of beers and a truckload of tranquillisers, but all I can muster is:

'Lost my appetite.'

Once she leaves for work I head for the local chemist in Morningside to get tranquillisers. I feel so heavy and tired, I want to sleep for a week.

It takes me five months to snap out of my depression, and when I finally do my brothers inform me that the money from our inheritance has mostly been used up to pay for the huge hospital bills. Tommy explains that he and Gerald were so full of anguish they put the house on the market immediately and sold it, together with all its contents, to the first buyer for an absolute pittance. Part of me is beside myself but when I really think about it, none of us could have lived there anyway.

Unfortunately I'm not selling much art right now, as I'm not producing anything new. The money I receive from the small profit on my father's house soon runs out, and Alice and I start bickering. She's astounded that I refuse flat-out to get a job, and I'm frankly astounded that she expects me to get a job when I already have a job; I'm a full-time artist and things are just a little slow at the moment. The next day I receive a cheque from selling an artwork and I can't help myself from being outrageously extravagant. I confess I have brilliant moments of flashiness. I arrive home with a massive block of Parmesan cheese from some overpriced Italian deli, and a Black Forest cake from the *C'est si bon* Bakery in St George's Street.

'To celebrate,' I laugh, when Alice asks me what the cake is for. 'To celebrate life'.

Alice, thank God, has a full-time job working in credit control, and the worse thing about working in credit control is the Knox Guide. No one gets credit if they are in the Knox Guide.

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A week later, Alice comes home in tears. 'It wears me down Nigel. It's just not rewarding, I'm preying on other people, hounding them for money, when clearly they don't have any. I can hear children crying in the background. There is so much arguing, it's just messy and I don't like it. Please get a job teaching art or something then I can be a teacher or do something worthwhile, anything but this.'

I find Alice crying uncontrollably in the bathroom after dinner.

'Nigel, I can't keep the truth from you. I won't be going back to work tomorrow because a colleague saw our name in the Knox guide. Imagine the shame I felt in front of everyone at work. Unpaid rent and every judgment are in this book, which is updated every month. Why didn't you tell me you were in debt?'

I hang my head in shame.

'And the worst thing is that you lie cheerfully. You have a believable sort of face, and you have eyes that let me in and take me away to a place I think I can trust, and that's what makes it so shocking. To think I travelled so far to come here, for what? For you? I said goodbye to England and my mother, just like that. I remember a woman yelled from the docks: "You'll marry a farmer when you get there!" Fat chance, I married you!' Her face red and angry, she slams the bathroom door.
Our life is very quickly disrupted and Alice is very emotional.

When I look at her now I realise that when I first met her she was never one to worry, or at least she never showed it in her face. That's always been one of the things I love about her, her ability to brush things off with a laugh. But lately her eyes carry far less sparkle and she looks run-down and tired. A worry frown has developed on her forehead, one long deep furrow running across from one side of her face to the other, and there is no doubt in my mind as to who has caused it.

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The debts are mounting and Alice announces matter-of-factly this morning that she can no longer support the both of us and her mother in England.

'I'm going back to England at the end of the month if you don't get your act together,' she says firmly, and I believe her. But I don't get my act together, and I become accustomed to the rude, loud knocking of debtors at the door. They have a distinctive knock. It's an authoritative hard double-knock, and the knockers sometimes knock so hard we feel they'll never stop. If we don't answer they shout our surname loudly and repeatedly, making sure all the neighbours can hear. We call the people who come at odd hours, mostly at night, 'the Knockers'. They continue way into the night and work in shifts. Someone is always at the door so you can't go out unless you jump out of the window.

'Open up! Open this door!' they bark.

I don't ever open the door for them. I remain quiet and dignified while they knock, but Alice can't handle it, she crumbles and sobs. I try to calm things down: 'Don't worry so much, we'll make a plan, we always do.'

'I'm the one who'll have to make a plan. Nigel I was taught that it's important to worry about things, that way you are accepting there is a problem. Worrying or opening the door means you are dealing with it, but you never worry about a damn thing, whereas I wake at three every morning, to worry.' Her words sting. Of course I'm worried sick, but I don't dare show it.

Alice is convinced it's better to confront them than to run away, so I give in to her idea and at month-end Alice puts her hair in curlers and when the Knockers come she answers the door in an old dressing gown and slumps her body against the door as if she hasn't eaten in days. Very cleverly she pretends she is deaf, and it works as the

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lady gets fed up and leaves. But it doesn't always work, as some of them are vicious. The women are the worst bullies, today a lady slaps Alice across her face.

'Liar! I know you types, you're full of tricks, but you can't fool me.'

We move again but the debt collectors follow us wherever we go. I've just arrived home now and close the front door when I hear the knocking. I get such a fright hearing them shout my name I jump off the balcony, luckily we're living on the first floor. I always find ground-floor flats. I guess we move a lot because of the Knockers. Even when a friend knocks on the front door as I don't know who it is, I pretend I'm not in; it's best that way.

They even send telegrams to Alice's work to frighten the life out of her. It works, she's horrified and so is her new boss, who finds out and asks her to pack up and go.

But the real crunch comes when I overhear Alice on the telephone, talking to a friend: 'When we got married I was so proud of him. He was drawing every day, he exhibited, he engaged with the community and he was fun. Now I feel like we're heading for a divorce. The problem is that I still have a soft spot for him, but since his father died he's been behaving like a child. He can't manage his life, he doesn't pay his bills, he has massive debts and he doesn't have a proper job. He just has no sense of responsibility, and when things get difficult he just gets into his car and drives off, or he sits here in the flat and does nothing, absolutely immobilised, just sitting here. And I can't take these people knocking anymore, they're even harassing me at work. I lost my job because of him. I have to get rid of him, I can't go on, it's destroying me.'

I'm devastated, but I know everything she says is true. I try to convince Alice that we should move far from Durban to the countryside for a brand new start. She slowly warms to the idea.

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'But only if I can secure a teaching job in the town we choose, and you deal with all your debt,' she insists, and I agree that I too will have to find a job.

'Oh Nigel it's such a relief to hear you say that. I'm so happy you're dealing with this at last.'

But this morning as I leave the flat I'm arrested for the countless unpaid bills and I'm in jail for three days when Alice visits me, wearing a headscarf and dark sunglasses and hoping no one will recognise her. She sneaks me a couple of rands.

'They've already admitted it was a mistake; I'll be out in a few hours,' I lie. What a fine actor I am – but there is nothing fine about our lives falling apart.

'Nigel, pride isn't strength, it's just another form of weakness. You've got to plead, admit you're guilty, or they won't let you out. Let's make a payment arrangement, let's tell them how things really are,' she pleads.

'Okay, okay, whatever you want.'

Then Alice drops a real bombshell. 'Nigel, I've just found out that I'm pregnant.'

'I'm going to be a dad!' I beam, and Alice bursts into tears.

'But Nigel, if you don't sort this out I'm going back to England. I'm dead serious.'

'Of course I'll sort it all out,' I reassure her, and I give her Mr Lewis' number.

Alice contacts Mr Lewis, who kindly bails me out. I tell him the truth and he says he will do his best to fob off my debtors for as long as he can, but I must leave town tonight.

We move to Underberg and by some miracle I find a job, as the manager of the Sani Pass Hotel. We're staying in the fanciest house, massive rooms and high ceilings. It starts off well when Marilyn is born. We buy new furniture, new silk

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curtains and an expensive new pram. But then my contract expires and next thing we have to sell all our furniture and we're in a boarding house back to living on pilchards and toast. When Marilyn celebrates her second birthday we don't even have a camera to take pictures. Mostly we sneak out of hotels and boarding houses early in the morning to avoid paying. We have no choice.

We move to Pietermaritzburg where we use false names checking in, names of people we make up. At night once Marilyn is asleep we hang around the bar and play poker with trucker types and women who say they aren't bothered with the 'burden' of having children, never mind a husband 'around the neck'. These are tough women who chain-smoke Camels and wear vests without bras. I watch Alice whip everyone at poker, drawing deeply on each inhalation of another Cameo Light as if it is her last. She started smoking when I lost my job in Sani Pass; she smokes a pack a day now.

It's nearly 3 am and I can't sleep. We're going to have to get our things and go in just over an hour. I feel a terrible sadness knowing that I have created so much upheaval in our life. I pull out my A5 sketchbook and sharpen my pencil, a black and red HB. I sketch my young daughter sleeping on the porch. The hadedas start up as another hadeda arrives to settle down in the tree.

Despite everything, I consider myself to be very resourceful. When we have no money we simply sleep in the back of my car, a 1972 white Ford bakkie that Marilyn calls our 'white lounge'. And I've started playing the piano. When we're fortunate to be in a hotel for the night I crack my knuckles and slowly warm up each finger for imagined concerts in the lounge. I draw the curtains to shut out the light so it feels like a real-live theatre. I select a cassette of music, like Rachmaninov; once warmed-up and seated, Marilyn presses play. The table comes alive, like a piano, and

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my fingers plonk hard and enthusiastically, imitating the rhythms and drama of Rachmaninov. I plonk harder, and Marilyn dances and turns the music up louder.

And I love to sing:

'Edidlee mobolay, I think we'll have fish and chips today, just like we had yesterday, edidlee mobolay.'

Tonight as there is no standard meal of pilchards on toast, I open a can of baked beans and serve it with a packet of salt-and-vinegar chips. TV snacks, I like to call them. Never mind that we don't have a TV.

'The problem with you,' Alice barks – and boy, lately she does bark – 'is that you refuse to work for anyone but yourself. If you just worked for someone, and painted at night, maybe just for once we could pay the rent on time. If you worked for someone, maybe we'd have a TV.'

'But we have TV gowns,' I joke, 'and TV gowns are a damn good start.'

Our TV gowns are red with thin blue and white piano stripes. Alice wears hers with fake pearls and heels and Marilyn and I wear ours too and all three of us go window-shopping at night. We catch the bus into town, where all the furniture shops have placed television sets in their windows and keep them on all night. You can't hear any sound but we, alongside other families, are hypnotised by the SAUK/SABC TV test patterns, telling the time like fancy digital watches. Alice and Marilyn love the *Shane*, the cowboy western on every night at seven. It stars David Carradine as Shane the dusty cowboy. 'Shane, I love you Shane', they whisper, their noses pressed against the window as the credits roll. They watch nearly every episode through the shop window.

Despite the good times, our relationship suffers and Alice no longer has such a wonderful sense of humour.

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Today I joke with her:

'I reckon a cat's death can help you make a decision about your life – but the cat must be as grey as I imagine Russia to be.'

'Nigel, what are you talking about? This world is no place for dreamers. You have to be practical.'

'I'm not a dreamer, I'm an artist.'

She gets upset and makes a scene. A shoe flies across the lounge. A glass smashes to the floor.

'Why don't you just get a proper job and stick with it like everyone else?' she pleads.

'I'm not like everyone else.'

'Can't you be just for a year or so, so we can sort this money mess out? I can't support the three of us any longer.'

'I'll never work for someone,' I rant. 'I'll always be my own boss. I am the boss of my own time and I'll choose when to sleep and what time to wake.'

'Then go live on an island.'

'I don't need an island, I'm happy right here.'

'Do you think we're happy? Do I look happy, Nigel? I've lost 20 pounds from worry. I'm having nightmares from the stress of moving. We just can't keep this up. I can't support you any more. Marilyn has been to half a dozen schools already, it's not normal.'

'This is just a bad patch. We've had it good, and we'll have it good again.'

'A bad patch! You call this a bad patch? I'm only just starting to get back on my feet by getting an evening job on top of my daytime teaching job to pay off your debts, Nigel. Please, just leave.'

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She is understandably disillusioned that I will ever change. But I like the way I am, defiant, proud, not following the norm.

'I have to let you go,' she says. 'You must understand, if I leave you maybe you'll change.' She packs up my few things, hands them to me, and I leave.

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Chapter 9

After our blow-up I secure a job in the small town of Bulwer as the manager of the Bulwer Hotel, and this convinces Alice to move again. Everything goes well at first; Alice is teaching at the Bulwer Primary School and Marilyn has really settled in and is making new friends. I make a new friend too; Donald Oliver from Johannesburg is a property man with a refined accent and cosmopolitan manner. His smart navy suits together with his gold swallow cufflinks give him the city edge. We very quickly – perhaps rather too quickly – become friends, over drinks and poker in the Bulwer Hotel pub.

Donald is a great conversationalist and yes, I guess some would call him just plain smooth, as Alice does. Being in Bulwer, where I've come to live simply, paint and manage a small country hotel, I admit to being starved of good conversation. What captivates me about Donald is his visionary plans. His business idea for Bulwer is a sound one, to create self-catering chalets and a small guesthouse at the foot of Bulwer Mountain. It will be, he says, very different from the Mountain Park Hotel, an old Tudor homestead with low ceilings, creaking floors and Blackwood ceilings. There won't be any ancient swords and battleaxes from England and Spain. Donald is keen on my creative input, he has asked me to handle the interior design, so I'm determined to do something fresh and local. I plan to make detailed paintings and drawings of the town and its people. I've already sketched all the architectural plans and I see it as an artistic exploration, one that will give me new life for Alice, Marilyn, and I, and in these planning months I've taken on a new energy. Alice agrees that at last I am able to combine my creative talents with business and earn some money to set us up – finally a way out of struggling as an artist to make a living without having to hold down a conventional job.

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We spend months plotting and planning, we're a potent team pooling complementary skills, and the more we plan the more I am convinced this is going to be the deal of my life. I am more interested in the wider concept, the bigger dream, than in a few buildings on a pretty patch of grass in the country. Alice is especially proud that I will be creating employment by training locals to be nature guides through the forests where the Khoisan once lived.

And what better business partner than smooth Donald to finance everything? The only downside is that because the project isn't yet up and running we can't draw salaries, which is unfortunate as I quit my job as hotel manager to focus on this major undertaking.

'It shows serious commitment,' Donald says, after our sixth Johnny Walker Black. Donald likes his drink – but then so do I, and Donald, thankfully, pays. 'You'll get it back of course and much, much more,' he says, patting me heartily on the back.

I like that he is so very confident. If a farmer at the bar overhears Donald chatting to me about our project, which is quite common in Bulwer as everyone knows everyone else's business, he nods sagely into his Castle lager while snacking on the bar's complimentary salt-and-vinegar chips, agreeing with everything Donald says. I bet he has studied Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

The fact that he never calls a meeting before lunchtime is, I agree, unusual, but this suits me fine, not being an early riser myself. In fact I'm secretly pleased to discover we have this in common, although Alice finds it odd.

We seal the final deal with a long boozy lunch and the old-fashioned trust of a gentleman's handshake; it all seems too good to be true. But for someone who has perfected the art of lying, it's a mystery why I trust him. Rajesh the barman tells me to watch out for Donald because he's racked up an enormous bar tab and still hasn't paid

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a cent. Then, when I make enquiries, it transpires that Donald hasn't even paid a deposit to secure the plot of land we were planning to build on. In fact, he hasn't even submitted my architectural plans. I'm fuming, but before I even have a chance to confront him, Donald simply disappears. I feel absolutely useless and such a fool. When I hear the news I can't face Alice to tell her the bad news. A side of me thinks that he must have sensed my softness, sensed I'm not a particularly strong man.

I take a walk, the sun is setting over Amahwaqa Mountain that towers nearly six thousand feet over this small town. It's always a magnificent sight, but tonight I don't take any notice; I've never felt so joyless in my life. I walk aimlessly along dusty Old Wagon Road, passing The Holy Trinity, a small, beautiful church built with hand-cut yellowwood. I hesitate, then stop. Maybe I should go in. It will be nice in the church, dark and cool and quiet. With the setting of the sun, the church has a golden glow; along with the heavenly scent of the Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow flowers, this greatly calms me. I walk up the neat path and hear a rustle to my left. Quietly crouching down on my skinny legs, protected by thick caramel safari socks, I look under the mulberry bush. At first I think it is a Natal robin, but then I see a dear little Orange Ground Thrush. The sight of the thrush consoles me, and I watch it for a while, admiring its agility and its ability to survive so easily on what I imagine to be nothing, an unsuspecting worm, a snail, a decaying plum or a few fallen mulberries. How simple to be a bird, I think, and in this moment I truly want to be somebody else, anyone but myself. I envy this thrush. Unfortunately I cough, as if physically irritated by the bird's freedom. The startled thrush flies off in the direction of the forest. As I stand up, I notice my socks are a blaze of blackjacks, but I feel so dejected I can't be bothered to pick them off as I should, one by one.

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I pause to look at the mountain before I enter the church. The setting sun creates a long, dark silhouette, and the stark outline of the stinkwood trees is such a comforting familiar sight that it makes me wince. How can I possibly leave this beautiful town and dear Alice who has never stopped believing in me? A sculpture of Mary stands at the entrance. It makes me think of my days at Merchiston College as a schoolboy, learning Latin, wearing a straw basher, saying daily prayers, greeting the nuns in the hallway, telling the truth. I enter the church; the heavy doors are engraved with ornate carvings of cedar trees and flying doves. Inside it is cool and quiet, dark and peaceful. I sit down on a pew near the front by the altar, I put my head in my hands, and for the first time in a long time, I sob. The tears can't come fast enough. My whole body shakes. As grief revisits, I cry even more uncontrollably. In my grief, I resent my family, I resent the town I've chosen, I resent my financial fantasies, I resent not following my dream as an artist, but most of all I resent falling apart in this sacred space. I think about my mother and know she would not judge me right now. Born Catholic I feel a higher presence watching me, judging me. I can't face looking at Jesus on the giant crucifix and I can't remember the last time I went to confession. I think the last time I entered a church was on my wedding day.

Now I know why some people drink so much, to forget. I think of the many people in this world I've been trying to forget. Forgetting for me is like diving under water and staying there, you only come up to the surface if you have to. It's like the Zionists being baptised on Sunday mornings on Battery Beach, now those are people who know about the importance of forgetting and cleansing sins.

And it is here in this church that everything piles up on top of itself, and the pile gets so high I can no longer hold it together – so it topples, as all my life moments based on falsehoods bleed into one another, and I topple too. As I finally let go of the

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pretence, these moments release themselves and bounce all over the place, on the church floor, against the walls; they ricochet against the stained-glass windows and even the pew I sit in. It's like atoms dispersed from old energy being released, searching to collect again, to create something new.

I finally accept I have failed miserably, and a small part of me, admittedly a very small part, wants to be a man and apologise to Alice. But it is too late, I convince myself: I have lied, and this time Alice so believed in me. In this church there is no escaping the truth, and I feel ashamed. What can I do to make it better when my lies have set everything in motion? I wish someone could see me like this, so I can finally share my torment, tell the truth and atone. I need someone to talk to, and the problem is not that there is no one appropriate to confide in, but that I can no longer bring myself to tell anyone the truth. I keep returning to the same uncomfortable thought: if I had spoken honestly to my father that day; if had stood up for myself, been more determined to follow my dream of being an artist, accepted America was not meant to be and instead gone to London to get myself to a higher level. If I'd excelled surrounded by excellence, surely today would have been easier.

I bury my face into my hands and sob, and I have to be honest, I'm sobbing mostly for myself, for I am the one in the biggest mess. There is a disturbance at the church entrance; I whip around, suddenly fearful that someone will see me in this state. Through my streaming tears I can hardly make out who has come in; as they get closer, I realise it is Leo, the dog from Bulwer Hotel. Relieved, I let out a stifled laugh. Leo stops, wary. I usually have excellent posture, but sitting in the pew with my shoulders slumped and my head bowed, I am unrecognisable. Leo visits the church every day just before sunset to drink the Holy Water that Father O'Reilly

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leaves out for him in a big blue bucket near the altar, but he is unaccustomed to anyone being there at this time.

'Leo, come boy,' I call out shakily. Leo relaxes the instant he recognises my voice, and pads slowly toward me.

Leo is a magnificent looking Chow with long wild cinnamon hair. He looks like a little lion. He licks me with his blue-black tongue. I bury my head in his soft, woolly neck and hold onto him tightly as I sob even more, my chest heaving. The dog keeps still; he's most wonderful at comforting me. We sit here for some time, and Leo only moves to drink his water once my breath calms down.

I blow my nose with my hanky, then I pull out my small black comb from my pocket to comb my dishevelled hair. I gently pat Leo, look into his deep-set eyes and stroke his wrinkled forehead.

'Good boy, good boy, Leo.'

I want to reward him but I don't have any biltong. And I know Leo loves nothing better than biltong and drinking warm tea with lots of sugar, usually from a large saucer under the corner barstool at the pub. The thought of the pub makes me feel the need for a stiff double whiskey, so we both head for Bulwer Hotel, like two cowboys in desperate need of a drink.

We take a right into Main Road, a long stretch of tar that takes you to Pietermaritzburg if you turn left and to the nearby town of Himeville if you turn right. The road to the hotel seems to reach out forever, growing longer and longer while my breath gets shorter and shorter. At one point my legs feel like they're about to buckle, so much so that I have to stop and rest. I stand for a while with my hands on my hips, wondering what to do. A bakkie pulls up beside me: 'Nigel! Want a lift? Buy you a beer. You look like you could do with a cold one.'

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I must look as bad as I feel and I'm so out of breath I take longer than expected replying. I wave a hand, buying time, and say: 'Thanks Fred, all good, I'm taking Leo for a walk. Keep a stool for me.'

I smile weakly at the local farmer, a charming, perpetually sunburned character with a rather unfortunate high-pitched laugh. Fred Dixon is a big man, built like an ox. His legs are solid like baobab trunks, and his chest is the size of a wine barrel. It's an absolute wonder he manages to squeeze his massive stomach and those giant legs into his small 1300 Ford bakkie.

'See you later, Nigel,' and he drives off.

After seeing Fred I decide to get back to my bakkie and get out of Bulwer as there is nothing left here for me here. Alice will be fine, she's a survivor, I try to convince myself, although I can't bear leaving her and Marilyn like this, without even a goodbye.

I walk on past the police station then wander off into a nearby grove of yellowwood trees, where I find a large rock to sit on. I don't notice that my only companion, Leo, a witness to my breakdown, has lost interest and ambles off to laze on the cool wide cement steps of the Bulwer Hotel. I feel overwhelmed but am relieved to have moved out of the full view of Main Road so I can sit down and gather my thoughts. As I walk back I can't but help still think that lying is such a wonderfully private affair, being alone in your mind in a place that is familiar and safe, that gives space to wrestle with a secret truth. Lying is ultimately comforting. To think he founding myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Adam and Eve, revolves around a lie. Ever since Eve told God, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate,' we have been deceived, and now we continue to deceive, or at least I do.

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I admit I have become exceptionally good at lying. In fact, you could say that I am a man with a sparkling talent for hiding the truth. The biggest disadvantage of lying is that there is no one I can tell what really happened, or how I truly feel. Take today; today lying repulses me but there is no way I can tell Alice the truth, there is just no way, especially while she is so radiantly happy. And considering I created this momentary happiness, I can't bear to be the one to break it. I have an enormous capacity for self-deception, so much so that I truly deceive myself into thinking that in lying to others, I give them momentary hope. This is perfect for someone like me who lives in the now, so why not make that moment a radiant one for others?

I am especially proud that I never for a moment display any lapse in emotion, as that is the key to successful lying. I walk back to the house, consumed with the idea of escape. I creep in and pick up my car keys. I can hear Alice singing in the bathroom, it sounds like a happy tune from The Supremes. I can't spoil this, it would be cruel, it's best not to disturb her and leave respectfully; I'll make a plan and things will change and we'll be back together before I know it. But Alice suddenly walks in with a towel around her. I freeze then quickly smile.

'Got the cheque, my first fat salary, it's right here,' I blurt out, patting my top pocket. 'Cashing it tomorrow and we're home free. Our ship has finally come in.'

Alice blushes. The relief on her face is priceless. She flings her arms around my neck nuzzling her face under my chin. She has always believed in me, never doubting that I'd not pull through. I'm so impressed by her loyalty I want to do anything, anything at all to escalate her happiness.

'Nigel, I am so proud of you.'

'Ah, it's nothing, just money. It was no big thing really, drawing a few plans, cracking the deal.'

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I smile, rather bravely considering the circumstances, I think, and on cue, Alice smiles too. I haven't seen her this happy in years. But then I have to sit down as my chest suddenly tightens. Was that a flicker of suspicion in her eyes? This momentary paranoia sets my mind racing. How can I continue to lie like this? I have no cheque in my pocket, I have R10 left to my name and I do not have the strength to tell her the truth. I never did. The happier she looks, the more I lie. I'm so entangled in lies, I am convinced I no longer have a choice. I have to lie, what else is a man to do in a situation like this but lie, then go away to think about the truth?

Experience has taught me that it would be too explosive to confront both truths at once, exposing yourself to someone, especially someone you love. It is far better to deal with it on my own, at the back of my secret mind. Instead of thinking what she will think of me when she finds out – as this time, she will find out – I block it from my mind. I daren't reveal my feelings, or express the building fear mounting inside me.

'What are you going to buy?' I cajole her enthusiasm.

'I really need new bras and maybe a nice new pair of sandals. New towels, we desperately need new towels.'

'Whatever you want. We can go for a slap-up meal afterwards, maybe stay the night at the Imperial.'

'I'd rather come home, Nigel, let's save the money.'

'Whatever you want. And we'll take a leisurely drive; you can shop at your favourite store in Pietermaritzburg.' I laugh, slightly embarrassed, as we haven't been there for some time now.

We enjoy a quiet pot of tea with Marie biscuits to celebrate. As I sip my tea, I think that it is a splendid idea to believe most fervently that I do indeed have that fat

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cheque in my top pocket, and that I *am* going to cash it tomorrow. These thoughts calm me greatly and I feel more in control; it helps me get through and I am learning to be exceptionally good at getting through, even if I believe my own fantasy only while sitting with Alice in our kitchen in this rundown rented house with a garden of stinging nettles in the village of Bulwer at the foothills of the Amahwaqa Mountain.

But what should I do next? Where should I go? I have just enough petrol to get to Pietermaritzburg, but then what? Maybe I could head for Durban, freewheel most of the way, stop at Sea View to visit Tommy, stay a couple of nights, and get my thoughts together? Then I remember I am no longer on speaking terms with my older brother and that I owe him money, so that is a stupid idea.

Nervously, ludicrously, I suggest:

'Let's get a new teapot too? Let's get glasses, red martini glasses.'

Alice giggles.

'What time are you going to cash the cheque tomorrow?'

'First thing.'

First thing to me was not the same thing as first thing for you or Alice, that's if you consider first thing being at the bank the minute the doors opens. First thing for me means mid-morning, say just after 10.30am.

'May I come with you? We can do a good food shop. We don't have much.'

'Of course.'

Alice reaches out for my hand. I focus all my strength on keeping it steady.

'Nigel, I can't wait for tomorrow, it's really something to look forward to.'

She is so thrilled she doesn't notice my growing agitation as I walk to the door to get some fresh air, nor does she notice that my hands are shaking.

'Going for a quick walk.'

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I don't wait for an answer. Alice is gazing out of the kitchen window, lost in a happy daydream. I leave everything behind, even my toothbrush. Marilyn is asleep. I get into my bakkie and head south, putting on Billie Holiday. At a time like this, her voice is immensely soothing.

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Chapter 10

I'm sleeping in my car under a bridge near the Umgeni River by the Blue Lagoon. It's here that I meet a new friend called Ricky, or the Gas Man as he is known because he delivers gas over the weekend to families living in the locations.

The Gas Man, in his mid-sixties, lives in a caravan in the nearby park. He lives with a yellow budgie called Pretty Boy. His caravan is full of stuff like miniature battlefields of toy soldiers and posters of South African rugby stars with thick ugly necks and pictures of Elvis. All the pictures are sticky-taped to the wall and he keeps messy stacks of paperback novels under his chairs. I've already read *I was a Kamikaze* and *Massacre in Rome*. What I most like about visiting him in his caravan is listening to him playing the pennywhistle and sitting on his chocolate brown chairs; they're really soft. During the week he wears a black suit and plays the piano at a shopping centre in town, and on the weekends when he's delivering gas he's convinced he's Elvis, he even sings like Elvis. But whereas Elvis has become a fat man in a white jumpsuit with lots of gold chains, the Gas Man is reed-thin skinny and plays the piano and pennywhistle and eccentrically delivers gas wearing his Scottish kilt and red ankle cowboy boots.

'The children love it,' he laughs.

'I also play at The Rock Gospel Café for Christian supper evenings in Pinetown and I perform at hospices, old-age homes and SPCA charity events for free,' he says with child-like glee. I went to watch him once and from behind he looked like a giant praying mantis in a Scottish kilt playing the piano, he was all long dancing arms and long piano fingers.

I find him such an innocent conversationalist. He says things like, 'Don't you think life is just so interesting? I always just want to live another hour.'

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And: 'Do you know I haven't touched a woman in twenty-five years? My friends joke and say, "your life must be boring, man," and I reply, "not at all, I just know how to control myself," and he collapses into uncontrollable fits of laughter.

The Gas Man and I have become really good friends, I help him deliver gas on weekends and he even lets me sleep in his caravan, but he keeps extraordinary hours. He goes to bed at 5 pm and then starts his day at midnight by switching on the light to tune into Radio Nederland after feeding Pretty Boy. At 5 am he goes back to bed and sleeps until 6.30, then wakes to make his regular breakfast of Jungle Oats and gets dressed in his smart suit to go off for the day to play the piano.

He's had a tough life really yet he is so incredibly cheerful. When he was three months old he says he was taken to an orphanage. 'I used to cry myself to sleep. But I'm not looking for sympathy,' he tells me with a big smile one night, drinking a cold glass of milk.

'There are thousands of cases like mine. I've got over those memories. But I still get these terrible headaches, and whenever I get depressed, I'm strict with myself. I say, "Gas Man you've got to pull yourself out of it." Then I open the curtains and all the windows in the caravan and tell depression it can just fly out of the window, into the Umgeni River and out into the Indian Ocean, and you know what?' he beams, 'It always does.'

One day we're chatting away in the caravan when we hear gunshots from the street.

'Heavy calibre, must be a .45.'

'How would you know?' I ask, stunned by such gun knowledge.

'I was a police officer in Harare for twenty-five years. I received four medals for service and efficiency.'

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'What else are you hiding from me?' I laugh.

'Did I tell you that on my free evenings I played at the mental hospital in Harare, for over ten years? I think it helped the patients, because music is the best medication.'

He tells me he never married, and he seems perfectly happy about it.

He is a fascinating chap, what some would call a kind old soul, so I am devastated when I hear that he has lost his day job playing the piano and he wants to move to Pietermaritzburg.

'That's the joy of having a caravan, my man! That's the joy. I love my mobile home, it keeps me young and it keeps me free.'

And that is the last I see of him.

I decide to hit the road too, so I head up the North Coast and stop at Stanger when I see some poor sod with his bonnet up, his Ford Cortina stuck on the side of the road. I always stop to help. I could never be the type of person who carries on driving, minding their own business. I know some people don't like to get involved, they say life is more peaceful that way, but although I lie now and then, I know I'm a little bit like the Gas Man in that I'm kind, especially to strangers. Sometimes I'll even tow their cars to the nearest garage and get truly stuck in. At first I had very basic car knowledge, but through persistence and sheer determination to help I'm now a whiz at fixing cars. Admittedly, at first it was just an amateur interest, peering into the engine and saying stuff like, 'Perhaps it's a blown gasket? Have you checked the fan belt? What about the sump?' and I'd carry on poking about, banging on parts of the engine. The funny thing is that I've discovered I'm good at fixing things, but not people.

I so miss my little family, especially taking Alice and Marilyn for Sunday drives in this bakkie. Marilyn's little stick legs were always firmly wedged beside the

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gearstick as we squashed up cosily in the front. We didn't drive anywhere in particular, but we'd always look out for a nice quiet stretch of road that had a place to stop with a view. Like other families we'd bring out our cool drinks and eat sliced oranges or bananas, or egg mayonnaise sandwiches. The annoying thing for them was that we usually had to take time out from our Sunday drive for me to fix a car that had broken down, and it was never something simple. It was fine if it was just an empty petrol tank; I always kept spare petrol in a drum with me as mysteriously I still haven't been able to fix my petrol gauge. The easiest was if it was a flat tyre, and I didn't even mind the wait if the car was flooded. Alice fortunately always had a book with her, and Marilyn her kokis and a colouring book, but often it was something more serious and time-consuming, like having to replace the head gasket or a broken crankshaft.

Very practically – and generally, no one would ever accuse me of being practical – I keep spare pieces of hosepipe and cut them up to create make-shift pipes. I even have a few fan belts and an impressive tool kit that I've built up over the years, which I keep behind my bakkie seat. And when I work on cars, I only drink tea, and smoke Dunhill gold pack.

'Patient as a fool,' Alice would tease, handing me a cup of tea as I stood peering into the engine. Alice always travelled with a flask of Five Roses.

As half the day slowly peeled by, just like that our Sunday afternoon drives became early evening drives down through the winding Umzimkulu Valley with its long curvaceous bends and steep climbs. Some days we'd drive all the way to Richmond, maybe Creighton or Sani Pass, and Underberg was only twenty minutes away. Alice didn't even look where we were going as she'd have her nose stuck firmly between the pages of a novel.

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'Look, a horse!' shouted Marilyn.

'Lovely, Marilyn,' she smiled, without looking up.

'Dead dog.'

'Lovely,' she smiled, clearly not hearing, and still not looking up.

'Maybe we should stop? It could still be alive,' I said.

'Stop, stop,' insisted Marilyn.

'Let mummy just finish this chapter.'

We didn't stop.

But our Sunday drives stopped as word spread of the garage at the bottom of our garden. I even had what Alice called a mechanic's manicure – the half-moons of my nails were pitch black and the lines in my palms stained with dark oil. I washed it off with a thick greasy substance Marilyn called black butter. Tinkering in that garage over the weekends singing with Sinatra, '*I've got the world on a string, the string around my finger*,' I felt so incredibly happy.

And word sure spreads fast when you're happy to do something for free. I've learnt quickly that people don't pay unless you ask, and I never ask. It's too humiliating to ask; if they don't offer any money it's because they don't have it.

Sometimes they pay for the parts upfront, but they never pay for the labour. Instead, I get a bottle of cheap whiskey, a box of avocados, giant bottles of mango atchar or, if it's Christmas, a huge box of Quality Street chocolates. I once got two lemon trees and a rather nice art-deco wardrobe for fixing someone's shocks and welding together their broken crankshaft; I planted the lemon trees and Alice sold the wardrobe for R70.

I collect car manuals at car boot sales and church fêtes. I have an incredible manual collection for Austin Healeys, MGBGTs, Fiats, Ford Cortinas, Ford Escorts;

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you name it, I have the car manual. It gives me immense joy when I stop to help and can whip out the exact manual, this greatly impresses the owner, reassuring them I know exactly what to do. Alice even found me a pair of mechanic's overalls for R2 at the Pietermaritzburg SPCA fête. I love my petrol-blue overalls. When I first put them on I was so pleased I sang and did a little jig: '*Grab your hat and grab your coat, leave your worries on the doorstep… direct your feet to the sunny side of the street…*'

So now that I see a car broken down just outside Stanger, I can't help but stop. I pull out my blue overalls, which I keep neatly folded under my seat and, looking very official, I confidently stride across, toolbox and Ford Cortina manual in hand. As I say, the manuals impress people, and I love to impress. It's in my nature to be a people-pleaser. But as Alice says, people-pleasing never gets anyone anywhere. Somewhere, somehow there is always a fall-out, she reckons.

'People-pleasing is always at the expense of someone else who lands up not being very pleased at all,' she says.

Alice once got so fed up with all my people-pleasing, she said she'd blown her gasket. We laughed so much.

Nowadays I choose to remember all the good times rather than the bad, like when I bought ridiculously expensive Easter eggs – sure, as a result we had no money left to pay for our electricity, but I'll never forget those eggs. They were beautiful, decorated with roses of lavender and pale pink marzipan, and massive, each the size and shape of a rugby ball. They were wrapped in pink cellophane paper with a big red ribbon bow, and a small gold sticker with red cursive writing that said: *C'est Si Bon.* Inside were the finest-quality chocolates, filled with heavenly rich liqueurs. Marilyn wolfed down her first Cointreau chocolate at six. To think I drove all the way to Pietermaritzburg to buy them.

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'Luckily it's dark chocolate,' I joked, and we all laughed.

Marilyn thought it was especially fun, eating eggs in the dark. It sure was.

And I loved it when Alice would tease me: 'Who is the muggins today, Nigel?' And she knew she was the muggins that day. It was always the muggins in the family who had to clean up.

'Muggins of course has to do it,' and she would tease me even more.

'But you're a five-star muggins,' I'd say, and this always made us laugh.

I get under the car to take a closer look. The exhaust pipe is in bad shape but that's not the worst of it, the crankshaft looks pretty damaged too.

'Thank you for stopping,' says the owner of the Ford Cortina.

'My pleasure.'

'Where is your garage? Maybe we can tow it there,' he says.

'My garage is back in Pietermaritzburg, I'm off for the week,' I lie. 'But you wouldn't think so,' I laugh, and he laughs with me.

'We can tow it to my house in Stanger. Come for lunch, my wife will make you a delicious mutton breyani, you like breyani?'

'I love breyani, especially mutton breyani.'

And I'm in for my first good lunch in ages. His wife Fatima in her shocking pink sari and slops is very hospitable and she makes the most delicious mutton breyani; it is so good I enjoy a second helping. Her mother, five foot nothing, sits there watching me eat. She has a massive double chin that wobbles dangerously as she speaks, and judging by the short bristly hair on her chin, she looks like she shaves. She wears a dark green sari and the same style slops, which is unfortunate really as she has long toenails like ill-kept claws.

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After lunch it only takes me a couple of hours to fix the car; fortunately I am able to borrow a welder from their neighbour. I must admit the neighbour is a most odd looking fellow with a terribly exaggerated overbite, and he is wearing green gumboots even though it isn't raining, but he's very kind and gentle mannered. When I say goodbye to Fatima, she gives me the rest of the breyani in a Tupperware and her mother kindly packs a wet face-cloth in a bag for me plus two boiled eggs, a big pinch of salt in a small plastic packet tied up in a knot, and a separate packet with juicy pineapple pieces dipped in masala. I am touched. And the owner of the car, Dan, gives me R50 for fixing it.

'You're welcome anytime you want to visit for lunch or dinner,' says Dan, his head looking like one of those velvet toy dogs with nodding heads that some people have at the back of their cars. The three of them stand at the top of the driveway waving like old friends as I drive off; where to, I have no idea.

With all this moving I do miss the daily ritual of painting and drawing but I've recently buried the very thought of it. If someone gave me an art book for my birthday, I'd resent the art book and all the artists in it. I've even stopped visiting art galleries. I have to, because the times when I do, it reinforces in my mind that I am a failure. What saddens me even more is that I know as Marilyn gets older I will hate myself for warning her:

'Whatever you do, don't become an artist. And if you ever get to run your own business, don't let things go wrong, or they'll attach your personal assets, your house, your car, everything. That's what happened to me, they attached all our personal assets and we were left with nothing, not even your toys.'

About a year later, when I manage to track down Alice, she says matter-of-factly over the phone that she wants a divorce. On the day of the proceedings, the

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magistrate asks Alice why she wants a divorce and she explains that I abandoned my family and that I am a liar.

The magistrate turns to me: 'Nigel Levins, did you abandon your family?'

'Yes.'

As I say this I put my head down, I feel so ashamed. Now I know why Alice didn't bring Marilyn here today. Despite looking older, Alice still looks beautiful, she is dressed plain and respectable in a navy blue dress to the knee. She wears a hat, you have to wear a hat in court, it's a soft mustard yellow, with Mexican embroidery of a little beach scene.

Post-divorce I insist on taking Marilyn on a holiday. It's the December holidays and I've borrowed some money from my brother, Tommy, as I want to take Marilyn and Alice on a treat to Ifafa down the South Coast. I book one of those self-catering chalets down by the beach. Our chalet is ten metres from a railway line. It's a real holiday for Marilyn, who lives on sticky sweets and *Archie* comics. Alice joins us, rather reluctantly.

I still have a Polaroid of our family holiday on that desolate windswept Ifafa beach. Me with a cigarette in my hand, the ash about to drop, one hand on my hip as if I was at last taking charge, paying for our first and only family holiday, despite it being Tommy's money which I'd never be able to pay back, and Tommy knew this and gave me the money anyway. My fringe had blown up into the air and stood all skewiff because that day as I said, the wind was howling, and if you look closely you can see Alice's hair was already starting to go grey. She really looks the odd one out; her body language reveals a woman who had clearly had enough. Ifafa was not her glamorous destination of choice; she would have preferred to go to Mauritius. But Marilyn looks happy to be by the sea, and on the first morning she says at breakfast

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that she is madly happy to sleep in the same house with everyone, and to wake up in the morning to eat breakfast with the three of us around the same table.

The draw card of the holiday is a visit to the Wild Coast Casino. Marilyn is allowed to play the slot machines until it's discovered that she is under-age, so she has to wait outside for an hour or two, poor thing. She sits in one of those big golf cart cars because it starts to drizzle, that soft South Coast drizzle you get in the afternoon after a humid day. Marilyn is wearing the pink and purple striped mini-dress and white ballet pumps I bought her. Alice placates her with a Fanta grape served in a fancy glass, and I stand in the doorway watching them as Alice smokes. I return inside, where I give away most of the rest of our holiday money to Sol Kerzner. Then, with the last money I have, I order Alice's favourite drink; gin and tonic with fresh sliced lemon and lots of ice.

Alice waves at me when I show her the drink. Standing at the doorway I put the drink down and pat my shirt pocket with my hand, assuring her. She knows it's code for 'don't worry, I've got it, the money is safe here'. Of course, by now she knows it never is, although sometimes there is a couple of rand in there. To think it could have all been so easy had I just got a normal job in the corporation or something, it could have been so easy. Looking at Alice now, I realise that she never really asked for much.

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Chapter 11

I'm sketching a woman sitting at the far end of the bar, and she suddenly looks up and shouts, 'Hey, what do you think you're doing?' She leaps off her bar stool toward me; she is ridiculously tall and wide-hipped, but in a sexy sort of way. She sweeps across the bar like lightning and sits right next to me.

'Hey, I said what do you think you're doing, drawing me? You need to get my permission, you do realise that don't you?' and her face breaks into a smile. What a relief, I'm in no mood for any drama.

'I only ask because I'm practicing to be famous. Relax, don't look so serious, carry on drawing me!' She laughs a long throaty laugh.

'You don't say much do you?'

'I'm concentrating,' I'm really in no mood to chat, and this bar is such a dive and I'm so low, I had to sell my car two months ago. I'm just in need of a quiet drink and a place to sketch a stranger or two before I go find a place to sleep in the street.

'So you're an artist, hey? I'm a stripper. Bet you didn't expect that, hey?'

I smile. At least she is slightly amusing.

'I did this strip show for a bachelor's party last night. It was horrendous booze cruise on the Sarie Marais with a bunch of drunken young assholes who threw my clothes over the boat. Uncouth, classless males; privately schooled men from Michaelhouse, they're the worst pigs.'

She orders another drink: 'Brandy and Coke please, Jannie.' She turns her face back towards me: 'They don't appreciate what balls it takes to remove all your clothes in front of a crowd of men you don't know.'

'Sorry to hear that, but if you could just keep your face still I'll be able to finish your portrait.'

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'You are quite stroppy, hey? Okay but be quick, I have a client in an hour and I still have to go home and shower.'

I can't remember when I last had a good shower, I've been washing in public toilets. God, what I'd do for a long, hot shower.

'I tell you what,' I suddenly perk up, 'If I give you this portrait, may I ask a huge, outrageous favour?'

'Ag no man, don't spoil it. What? You want full house?'.

'No I was thinking more of asking you if I could have a quick shower at your place, I haven't had a good wash in weeks.'

'So that's the smell; it's you!' and she cackles.

I can't help but laugh because there's no point in getting angry with the only person in this world right now that could possibly offer me a shower.

'And I'll buy you another brandy and Coke.'

'You don't have to buy me a brandy and Coke man, I don't pay for my drinks here,' and she winks at the barman who winks back.

'If I like the portrait then you can use my shower but no funny business, hey. I'm no fool, so watch it. And you can only come after my client leaves; I take an hour. He's a Rhodesian farmer coming for an erotic body-to-body massage.'

'Deal,' and I sketch on feverishly as if my life depended on it. And as I start to draw her body, I suddenly notice: my God, she has massive breasts. I'm not really a breast man. Alice had small, pert breasts; this woman's breasts are ridiculous. As if reading my thoughts she says, 'My plan is one day not to have to flash my tits or say anything to shock. I'll even burn my baseball bat.'

Baseball bat? I don't ask.

'I'm Nigel by the way.'

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'I'm Lily, Lily the Brat, pleased to meet you. I also draw, that's why I don't mind you drawing me. I'm an artist too.'

I nod and keep on sketching. Just then a man walks in and greets her.

'That's Tony, he's married and has two daughters. He showed me pictures of them. They're both redheads, like Tony. I really talk to my clients. We don't just have sex. The one time when I asked Tony why he likes to be a regular, you know what he said?' and she leans in close, making it difficult for me to continue sketching. 'He said, I visit you, Lily, because you make me feel important. At home I feel like part of the furniture.'

I nod politely.

'Amazing, hey?'

'I guess it is, clearly you have a gift.'

'Exactly!' she enthuses. 'You, my friend, I can tell you understand me. I like a man who can understand me just like that.' She clicks her fingers in my face and I stop drawing.

'Lily, if you want me to finish this portrait you'll need to sit still.'

'Ag man, now you're getting all stroppy again like my third husband, no man, don't do that, it doesn't make me feel good.'

I sigh and put down my pencil and close my drawing book.

'Hey, relax doll, I know what you can do.' She grabs my pencil and tears a sheet of paper from my drawing book and scrawls down her address. She has really ugly, untidy handwriting.

'See you at my place at ten and you can shower, then you can finish the portrait, but it better be good!' She gets up and saunters off, waving bye to half of the establishment who all seem to know her extremely well.

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The thought of a shower is so thrilling I just can't contain my excitement, and I let out a golden 'Yeehaa!' in front of everyone at the bar, which of course is so embarrassing as now everyone thinks I'm just another dirty old man who scored a stripper's address and is about to pay for a shag.

It's nearly ten and I'm walking down Point Road to find Ben Corum, a block of flats near Addington Hospital. Lily is on the seventh floor.

'Howzit!' she greets me, as friendly as she was at the bar. 'Come in, man, don't stand out there like a moron, people will wonder what you're waiting for.'

I step inside. Her flat is full of mirrors. She has drawn her garish cherry red velvet curtains; the place is a mass of bottles of heavily scented oils, glittery gels and anti-aging creams. A faded red feather boa dangles from a pink shutter separating her bedroom, I imagine, from the large lounge.

'Welcome to my pleasure dome!' She turns on some music, Tina Turner's *Night Time is the Right Time*, and she starts to slow dance.

'Don't mind me, you go shower. It's right through there,' and she points towards the shower. 'I put out a fresh towel for you and an old gown. Relax, doll, don't look so nervous, I don't bite!' and she shrieks with laughter. 'Go, man, enjoy. I'll find you some clean clothes, an old shirt of my ex-husband's or something.'

Lily has a sticker on her bathroom door: 'God Heals', looks like someone has found the Lord. There are paintings stuck on the back of the bathroom door with masking tape. They look like abstract paintings of women dancing; they could possibly be self-portraits by Lily.

I strip down and am appalled when I see myself in the mirror. I am filthy, oh my God, I am filthy. I really need a shave. I open the door slightly and shout out

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above Tina Turner: 'Mind if I use one of your razors and have a shave? And may I use your shampoo too please?'

'Help yourself, just help yourself!'

So I do, and ahh, what joy, what a complete and utter joy simply to be able to wash myself. The shower is perfect, the temperature just right and she has laid out a clean big blue towel for me, and a red Chinese gown, XL. It's very generous of her, but how come she is so trusting? I'd never let a stripper I'd just met at a bar have a shower at my place. But I quickly lose interest in that thought as I start to enjoy myself. I must be in the shower for close on an hour, I just can't get out, the steam and the heat and the feeling of being sparkling clean again fill me with such a feeling of peace I want to sing, so I do – the Bee Gees' *Staying Alive.*

It is only once I shave and have a closer look at myself in the mirror that I realise how much I've aged. I sit on the loo and grab a book from the pile, they're mainly books on astrology, numerology and self-realisation, like *How to read your Aura*, and that annoying book for idiots, *Think & Grow Rich.*

'How was it?' Lily smiles, handing me a cold beer. 'Geez, doll, you look so much better, you're actually quite handsome without all that facial hair.'

'Thanks, that was out of this world.'

'Listen, if you want to crash here tonight on the couch you can. I'm actually finished and need to get to bed; you were in that bathroom for over an hour you know.'

'I know, I'm sorry but I had to take complete advantage of the situation,' I say, and she laughs. I am a bit suspicious of her hospitality but the couch is so comfy I fall asleep. Way past midnight I wake up with a start, disorientated, and then remember where I am. I can't help stroking my face, it's so silky and smooth after that glorious

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shave, I feel like a new man. I flop onto the bed in her spare room and wake late the next morning to the smell of bacon and eggs, paradise for sure.

'Morning. Right, my friend, I have a client in twenty minutes, so a quick breakfast and then you must be out.' She speaks with the efficiency of a kindergarten teacher telling her class they will all have to nap in twenty minutes.

I gobble down my breakfast that comes with great coffee, gather my things and am at the door ready to go in fifteen.

'Not bad, I'm impressed. So, Nigel, we had a deal. I still want you to finish my portrait, hey!'

'If you give me a recent photograph I can do it today and give it to you this afternoon.'

'Sounds like a good plan.'

Lily fetches a photograph of herself. In the picture she is wearing absolutely nothing, save for standing astride a baseball bat.

'Do you um, have anything where you're fully clothed perhaps?'

My, I think, how the mighty have fallen when I compare Lily to someone so graceful and refined as Sylvia back in Simon's Town.

'Oh don't be such a prude,' she admonishes me. 'Have you never see a naked girl before? My clients like to see nude pictures of me on the wall, so do this one. If you want another shower sometime, you'll do as I say.'

'Yes Ma'am!'

That afternoon I return with her completed portrait. I am still on a high, smelling clean and fresh. Just having a shower makes me feel like I want to get my act

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together, get a job, plan another exhibition, start being someone again, not a street bum as I've been these past few years.

'I love it. Geez, doll, you're bloody good hey! You professional or what?'

'Thanks, Lily, art is what I do.'

'I think you should do some more, can I give you some more photographs and also photos of my kids, I have two boys you know. I want a big painting of them for above my bed.' And she goes to fetch a bunch of photographs in a messy pile in a shoe box.

'Sit down my friend, you're not going anywhere, you've got lots of work to do.'

And that's how I come to live with Lily for nine months in exchange for portraits of her, her children, and even her four ex-husbands. It's perfect really as finally I have a rent-free room, all my meals are provided, and I can draw all day. Okay, it's not exactly the subject matter I had in mind, and I never expected to have a stripper as a flatmate but still, things are at last looking up.

Most fortunately, Lily works during the day. She says night-time clients are drunks and weirdos, which is a relief for me; at least I don't have to hang out in bars all night. Her clients are married, upmarket businessmen, or farmers from out of town.

'I'm basically in the game,' she says, 'because their wives won't do what I'll do.'

To think she once had a normal job.

'I used to work at John Orr's selling creams for Estée Lauder.'

She was constantly rubbing Estée Lauder firming cream into her thighs.

'I'm not cheap you know. This costs R150 a tub. Good body. Good money.'

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Her phone never stops ringing, it starts at six in the morning and sometimes she has to leave it off the hook to get some sleep. I love it, though, when she performs over the phone.

'Hi. What do you mean, how do I operate? With a scalpel and a white overall!' Throaty laughter.

'But wait till I take out my baseball bat, doll!' Shrieks of laughter.

Then she switches to being more serious.

'I book appointments half an hour in advance, and I work from home. It's very private. But once I lock you in the flat, doll, you're in trouble. I live on the beachfront, and it's paradise. How much do I charge for paradise? Well that depends how much paradise we're talking doll.'

For twenty minutes she gets paid R170. Lily is so confident.

'If I can make them laugh in the first minute, I know they're okay. I understand me, but the sad truth is that they're actually mostly sick. Their entire approach to sex is sick. I don't often meet a guy who will come on to me like a real man. I really just want to be treated like a lady. If I had the money I'd dress in really nice clothes, like Rita Hayworth.' Lily flicks through her prized possession, a black and white coffee-table book on film stars.

'Now this is how a lady should dress if she wants to be treated like a lady,' she declares pointing to a striking portrait of Rita Hayworth. 'It's very important what you wear you know. Some people think it's vain to worry too much, but people are always judging us. If you dress smart they don't judge you.'

Lily even wants those clips that make Hayworth waves; she wants Marilyn Monroe shoes and the whole toot. And she says she loves those little hats with the black lace in the front. Lily sits there with her book idolising Rita while wearing

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baggy game-ranger khaki shorts, hiking boots and a dark green bosomy vest with her pink bra strap showing.

Lily reckons men visit her because they need variety.

'Women should understand their men only lust after strippers and that's not love. The men love their wives and their children, that's why they don't leave them. I'd rather my man enjoy a good strip show and come home to me afterwards than have an affair with his secretary. Prostitutes and strippers don't pose a threat to marriage or society. No married man has ever proposed to me.' She sure knows how to play herself up conversationally: 'I'm going to dye my hair. I think I'll be different when I'm a brunette. As a blonde I drink brandy from 1-7 pm – a bottle and a half. But when I'm a brunette, I'll be a once-a-week whiskey girl. I'm expecting a farmer from Kimberly this afternoon, want to watch?' she teases me.

'I did my first strip when I was fourteen,' she tells me later that night, and now she's forty-something. 'I've always been strictly a one-man show, which is way better than working up and down Point Road. That's for rough women,' she sneers.

'I first got married when I was sixteen, to Ricardo. He was a short, stocky bodybuilder from Pretoria. He was seductive in a quiet sort of way.' I can't imagine how a bodybuilder would be seductive in a quiet sort of way, but I listen on.

'But when he stopped winning bodybuilding competitions he became an alcoholic, so I left him. He responded by committing suicide. I was so sad, we were very happy in the beginning. We were like flower children, so happy, so free.'

She jumps up to take a photograph off the wall to show me how happy they once were. They look like hippy children; young kids they were, too.

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'But I've learnt that everyone is happy in the beginning,' she says wistfully. 'Like parents with new children, lovers with new partners, husbands with new wives, the beginning is always the best.'

I nod. I really could do with a drink.

'I was eighteen when I met Roger.' It's incredible how she remembers her life through men, not events or moments. I find it really sad.

'Roger was much older than Ricardo. He had wiry silver peppery hair like a dirty old pot scourer, but he made me laugh. He was in his forties and he'd been married before. He worked in import-export. But that relationship didn't last long, he really was far too old for me. Then I moved from Pretoria to Hillbrow, where I ran a school for young strippers,' and you could tell by the way her eyes lit up like chandeliers she relished telling the story.

'I was taught by Arthur Fox from Manchester. You know, stick your tummy in,' she pokes my tummy and I laugh, 'walk like you're a beautiful model, like you're wearing Christian Dior. I'm well trained, I do a good show and I don't mess about. I had my own choreography and I taught my girls well. But this one girl had a dodgy boyfriend from East London with bad skin who wore these ugly pointy yellow shoes, he used to hang around waiting for her all the time. Then one day all the girls had left; I was packing up and he barged in and held a steak knife to my neck demanding money. I told him off. I refused to give him my hard-earned cash from training the girls. Do you know what he did?' She pauses dramatically, and I'm now all ears. 'He stabbed me in the neck with his steak knife! Now I keep a gun.'

Charming. My new housemate is a stripper, and she keeps a gun. Can it get any better!

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'And once I got beaten up so bad I was in hospital for three weeks,' she adds, but I've heard enough and make an excuse about why I have to go out.

I like Lily's flat. After four months it feels like home. And I love all the photographs on her walls, it looks like an amateur photographic art gallery. In the middle of a homemade poster collage of photographs of Lily growing up is that picture where she wears nothing but a cheeky smile, and instead of a star between her legs there's a baseball bat. On the baseball bat it says: 'Just do it'.

Lily wants me to sign her name on all the nude drawings I do of her. They are large canvas charcoal drawings. I'm not planning to exhibit them, so why not? I have no problem with signing them as if they were hers. I guess it is a bit odd but then our whole setup is pretty odd. Later I find out by wild chance that Lily is selling the drawings to her clients, and she isn't selling them cheap either. I discover this when a client arrives an hour early than Lily expects him, asking for his 'painting of Lily by Lily'. I quickly sign her name on the bottom of my latest picture and hand it over. He gives me R700! I'm gobsmacked.

I later confront Lily in the best possible way, as I don't want her to chuck me out. She giggles, pours herself a brandy and Coke and tells me her story:

'I'm working on my book, that's why I need all the drawings you're doing for me. I want it to look classy. Arty, you know, so rich folk buy it. They love reading about strippers and things they wouldn't dare do. One of my clients is a publisher in Johannesburg and he says if my book is good he can help me make a lot of money. But he says I must first market myself widely, and the paintings and drawings you're doing of me are great marketing, don't you think? Imagine, I'm up in private homes, and in offices and hotel lobbies and nightclubs. I'm on my way to being famous thanks to you, Nigel! Cheers!'

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I find all this hilarious.

'My book is based on daily diary entries,' she tells, me opening up a dark red book emblazoned with little pink hearts. It looks like a little girl's diary, it even has a lock on it, and she keeps the key around her neck on a gold chain with the gold crucifix she got from her third husband.

'Saturday 14 June,' she reads to me. 'I woke to a still, fresh blast from the past. A rather hot one at that; he was a little boy when I last saw him and now he's grown into a man, a fantasy vision. To think this little boy's father was once my lover! I only met him once at the funeral, after the suicide of my first husband. He said I was his fantasy when he was ten. He wanted the works. It felt strange and sexy at the same time. He really liked what I did to him. He was incredibly gentle. If only more men were like him, I would be more loving in my job.'

'You see, I have a plan!' she says, and she locks her diary and proceeds to tell me about her third husband Antonio, a builder from Richards Bay who she says was a good husband, as he paid all the bills and provided for everything, but sometimes he got stroppy.

'He called me warm and sensual. I loved Antonio. But I know men inside out. It turned out he was bisexual and he fell in love with an architect. I was gutted, but it wasn't meant to be so I had to let go. We're still friends. He's the one I had two kids with but now they live with their father and his new partner, Cecil. They're good parents but I miss my kids. They're living in Cape Town now.'

She shows me a few pictures of her twins but I already know them well from drawing them from their photographs. In the one picture the father, Antonio, has soft eyes, but the young teenage boys, tanned, healthy and buoyant, holding their

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surfboards, stare defiantly at the lens. It's the same hard defiant stare I imagine Lily gives her clients when it is time for them to leave.

'Everybody wants me out of this business, especially me and my children. I know that if my book sells well I can get them back and then I can change my life. But men like me. They come to me to relax. Men know they can talk to me about anything and I always make them laugh. They always say they feel different the minute they walk into my pleasure dome.'

She says she's now searching for her fourth husband.

'I want a toy boy, a great lover with lots of stamina, but I guess that kind of man wouldn't make a good husband. Maybe I'll stay single. It's difficult having a relationship when you're in this game.'

What I like about Lily is that when she isn't seeing 'clients', as she likes to call them, she spends her time drawing.

'See the different drawing technique here of the head compared to the body, it's because they are separate. You have to switch off in this job. Whatever you do in life, like when you do a job that's not really good for you in the head, if you do a job that makes you feel down, you have to switch off, otherwise it can kill you in the end. Ideally we should all choose something we love, something that really turns us on.' And she cackles into her drink.

'But I want a new life, something different from this,' she says looking at me quite seriously. And Lily has tried to change her life. She's stopped advertising her services in the 'entertainment' section of the classifieds and started advertising under the 'health/massage' section. She's burnt her Tarot cards, joined a church group, and started reading the Bible daily as if it was a real story.

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'You know, I've become religious now, but I don't preach to my clients. Not yet, anyway,' and she lets out her funny cackle.

She even stopped buying her special leg cream so she could save up to buy a computer. 'I'll teach them,' she says, 'they'll soon see that my CV isn't just between my legs.'

But her mind is scattered. She says things like, 'Maybe I could go into politics, hey? I can see my poster on all the street corners. I'd like that. Maybe I should start a trade union for sex workers, I'd call it the 'Just Do It' party and campaign all over South Africa, from Barbeton to Koffiefontein, from Welkom to Port Nolloth. I'd push for legalising the trade to force the girls to look after their health, and I'd campaign to regulate the industry. Doesn't that sound grand? And maybe' – she's definitely on a roll – 'you can hold a fancy press conference for the launch announcing that condoms should be mandatory and nobody below the age of twenty-one should be allowed to work in a strip joint. Yes, Nigel, that's great, I love it. You can be my campaign manager! I'll start a major campaign for decriminalising prostitution all over the country, we were never criminals anyway.'

I've never heard Lily calling herself a prostitute before. I suddenly realise that actually I'm living with a prostitute, but "stripper" always sounds more colourful, more fun, more bohemian.

Lily says she's tired of sex workers being treated like lepers.

'It's the same for black people you know. Simphiwe, one of my regulars, was talking about it the other day. He said white people treated him like he had some disease just because he's black. He even dresses up as a woman, as a domestic worker, when he visits me, to stop the neighbours talking and complaining. I did a painting of him,' and she pulls out the painting from a *Scope* magazine on the floor.

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'You see this light washing over us? It represents God. I believe that God will one day wash this country with godly light so we'll become colour-blind, then no one will care what colour we are because we won't be able to see who is black or who is white.'

I really can't comment, it all gets a bit too much. Lily is drinking more and more each day so she doesn't always make much sense.

'I bet none of the people living in this flat even know that a prostitute actually washed Jesus' feet. I wish I could get it though to these people that prostitutes are just normal bloody people. No one has the right to judge us.' Her tone gets angry. 'People don't realise what mental damage it does, what it truly does to your soul. Just because we're different...' She trails off and pours herself another brandy.

When I suggest to Lily that perhaps it is time I move out, she pleads with me not to, saying she feels safe knowing I'm in the other room when she is with a client.

'You know where the gun is. You never know, sometimes a man can just turn.'

The thought of that terrifies me, but then again I know the whole setup with Lily is just too good to leave. But she's starting to get on my nerves. She woke me early this morning, insisting I draw two nudes today.

'That's impossible Lily. I'm not a factory, I'm an artist. Art takes time.'

'I have two clients who will pay cash today for them, so no excuses. Just get up now and get cracking. It won't take you long, but they must be done by five,' she snaps.

I'm fed up with her bossing me about so when she leaves, I go out too. I spend the day thinking about what my next move should be, and I come across an advert in

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the *Mercury*. Cheshire Homes for the physically handicapped in Queensburgh is looking for a live-in caretaker. How hard can that be, I wonder?

The advert reads: 'Leonard Cheshire, a celebrated bomber pilot in World War II, started Cheshire Homes after the war when he felt a strong need to validate his life by helping others.'

Caretaking could be the perfect job for me because I'm good at doing odd jobs. I've been doing odd jobs all my life. I return to Lily's on a mission; I have a quick shower, get dressed up smart and write a few good references about myself in different handwriting styles. Then I backdate them, look up the phone numbers for the Sani Pass and Bulwer Hotels and put the numbers down, knowing that the people who worked there back then would be long gone. I take a bus to Pinetown and hitch a lift to Queensburgh, where I present myself to Chesire Homes. Fortunately they agree to see me at such short notice. The interview goes well, and the job sounds simple; all I have to do is make sure the Home remains in good condition by doing general maintenance work – simple things like changing light bulbs, repairing broken screens, latches and doors, painting fences, helping the residents with any small jobs to make their lives easier and keeping an eye on the garden. It sounds dead easy and I tell them so. A week later they call to offer me the job!

Now if I tell Lily I'm moving out she won't be pleased; she has set up quite a lucrative business selling my art as if it were her own. I decide to do what I do best – just leave. I pack very little. I look through my artworks but as I have no car, there's no way I can transport them. Lily will most likely sell them within a week, knowing her. There are certainly some I would like to keep, so I hide them at the back of the cupboard and stash them under the bed. I take a long last look at Lily's flat, then I leave.

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In the first few weeks at Chesire Homes I tackle their backyard. When I arrived it was a rubbish dump of broken wheelchairs, old mattresses, broken window frames and piles of magazines. It is completely transformed now, with row upon row of giant spinach, lettuce, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, chillies, carrots, baby marrows, strawberries, spring onions, beetroot, ginger, garlic, rosemary, thyme, dill and basil. I plant lemon, mango, wild banana and paw-paw trees. I fertilise an avocado tree they say has been barren for years, and now the residents of Cheshire Home are eating avocado on toast and in their salads. If you stepped into this backyard today, you'd think you were in a tropical jungle.

Between painting, growing vegetables and being an all-round handyman, I don't have time to get involved in a relationship. I haven't been with another woman since Alice got the divorce, and that was many years ago. I have no contact with Alice and I haven't seen her or Marilyn since we went on holiday down the Wild Coast. I try track them down but Alice must have got re-married or, who knows? She may have gone back to England and taken Marilyn with her. I hope not.

There are women at the Home, but it wouldn't be professional to ask any of them out, and it's not like you can exactly sneak out after dark for a drink. There's strict security, a signing in and out system, and I have to use the official kombi if I take any residents off the property.

There is one person I do enjoy and that's Doreen Bailey. Doreen was in a terrible car accident in her forties; her husband died and she of course survived but lost the use of her legs. She's now in her early fifties, very gracious and charming with a wry sense of humour. On the first day I meet her she laughs and says: 'Apparently I can do magic: whenever I'm in my wheelchair, I become invisible.'

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She isn't invisible to me. Her skin is soft and there is a matching softness in her hazel green eyes. And I like that her fragrance hangs in the air even after she has wheeled off. It's a wondrous blend of magnolia, jasmine and rose. I've seen a terrific black-and-white photograph of a youthful Doreen dancing, her long hair down to her waist, with an eight-piece jazz band in the background.

She has original artworks in her room; a lovely portrait of a woman reading, a painting of a mountain landscape that looks a bit like Bulwer, and one or two interesting abstract works. The colours in the artworks, the gentle blues and soft green hues, pick up the colours in the room. A cashmere blanket in pistachio, burnt orange and turquoise squares is always folded neatly at the end of her bed. There's always an unopened box of Turkish Delight and some poetry books on her bedside table, and her bookcase is bursting with good books. There's a small writing desk by the window with a neat stack of thick sheets of good stationery. I also like the fact that she always has fruit in a bowl and a single red hibiscus flower from the garden in a small blue vase.

She listens to classical music; Brahms, Chopin and Mozart. Beethoven, she says, she finds too violent. Cuban music drove her crazy with happiness before the accident but, she says, her taste in music changed overnight.

'Classical is more suitable now, more calming. But I want them to play Cuban music at my funeral, and I want everyone to dance.'

She has long, elegant piano fingers and wears just a smudge of red lipstick. Her thick silver hair is swept up in a loose makeshift bun with a HB pencil to hold it up. I love this quirk about her, and it transpires it is no quirk at all. Doreen likes to sketch, and this ensures she always has a pencil. She has done two rather good portraits of her children framed in simple wooden frames on her wall.

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'That's my son Dylan. He's living in Australia, and Lara lives in Canada.'

That's all she says about her children, but she speaks very openly about her disability.

'I miss stretching my legs. I miss running. I was a keen runner. I did the Comrades five times, and I was training for my sixth Comrades when the accident happened.

'I used to cycle,' I say.

'I can see that,' she smiles.

'My runner's body saved my life. If I hadn't been fit, I wouldn't have been able to recover. Anyone who's disabled has a very hard time trying to stay fit. You're basically taking in 3 000 calories a day, so you've got to burn those 3 000 calories or you're in trouble. I noticed that my body had begun to change because at first I focused on being in this wheelchair, but then I began to think of myself as a runner again.'

'You look great Doreen, just great.'

'Thanks, Nigel. Believe me, being in a wheelchair is training enough. There's so much strength needed just to get around. It's pretty tough sometimes just how much effort this whole thing is.'

'Your arms look good, very fit. Are you doing special arm exercises?

'I do upper body exercises every day, a few yoga stretches and breathing. But the truth is that after nearly ten years in a wheelchair, I'd still love nothing more than to put on a pair of my favourite old jogging shorts and go for a run, even a short run to the local café to buy some milk. And then I'd walk back, swinging my arms, enjoying each step, feeling every muscle in my legs. Mobility, I just took it for granted.'

'What's the upside? You read more?'

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'I do, and sitting all day has calmed me greatly. Not only do I read more but I think more, and it's good to be still. I sketch and write letters too.'

'Would you like it if I painted say some colourful scarab beetles on your wheelchair?'

Her face lights up. 'That would be fun, Nigel. I love what you've done in the bathrooms.'

One evening I painted giant Papua New Guinea jewel beetles on the bathroom doors. The vibrant colour lifted the energy of everyone in the home, and it really lifted mine; at last I was painting again.

'I can paint at night when you're not using your chair.'

'What if I need the loo?'

'I'm sure I can find you a spare wheelchair.'

'Let me think about it, it's very sweet of you to offer.'

'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'There is one thing, but I was thinking it would be more appropriate to ask the Sister.'

'Try me.'

'I'd love someone to shave my legs. I can't shave myself, and I'd love to wear this new blue dress my daughter gave me for Christmas, but it comes up to the knee.'

'I've never shaved anyone's legs before, but I shave myself daily so why not? What a pleasure. It's a date, then.'

'While you're down there, you could even give me a pedicure if you like,' she chuckles.

'I could paint scarab beetles on your toes.'

'Wonderful! Oh Nigel, you make me laugh. Thank you.'

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Just then the Sister walks in to take Doreen for her evening bath, but the Sister has forgotten her bath roster so she excuses herself to fetch it.

'How I'd love to take a shower instead of a bath. There should be special shower chairs for us to strap into. I do so miss having a wonderful shower.'

'Let me see what I can do.'

The thing is, I hadn't anticipated dealing with handicapped people. I have no experience of this, so at first it's overwhelming, the need for constant attention:

'Mr Nigel, my bedside lamp is faulty, please can you have a look at it when you get a chance. I love reading in bed at night…'

'Morning Nigel, my wheelchair needs some oil.'

'Nigel, please plant some asparagus for me? I'll share my delicious Hollandaise recipe – crème fraiche and Chardonnay white-wine vinegar with…'

'The door-latch of my cupboard just fell off…'

'My bedroom could do with a coat of bright happy pink, I'm finding the beige walls so, well, beige, depressing really…'

Once I get used to the varied requests I felt quite useful. I like that I can make them happy by fixing their things. And the volunteers and the staff treat me like I'm the boss; I like that very much.

Today I'm servicing all the wheelchairs in the Home, and I've started collecting manuals for wheelchairs; rigid-frame and folding-frame wheelchairs. I can't believe how many model wheelchairs are out there. I have planted asparagus for Mrs von Tonder, I've fixed Mr Padayachee's reading lamp, I've painted Mrs Nel's bedroom a bright candy pink, and perhaps I did go a bit overboard when I painted

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Asian flower beetles in brilliant metallic greens and malachite blues on the walls of the sunroom.

Tonight I busy myself drawing sketches, working on a number of designs. Finally, at about midnight, I think I may have designed the perfect shower chair. Why shouldn't disabled people enjoy showers, and why aren't designers coming up with revolutionary designs to change lives?

By 2 am I've finished the framework of the chair. I'm so happy with the result I want to wake up Doreen and ask her to test it out. I feel immensely fulfilled. I begin to cry, gentle, tears. I cry for Doreen not being able to go for a jog, I cry because I imagine that Alice has remarried, I cry because I miss my daughter Marilyn, and I sit in the workshop wondering if Alice has forgiven me after everything that went wrong.

If only I'd been more of a father to Marilyn, if only I'd spent more time with her as she was growing up. There are so many gaps in my memory. I was half a dad; half present, half absent. How, I wonder, has this affected her, if I was her first major male role model? The thought gives me a sharp pain in my chest. I have to sit down. The closest chair to sit down on is the shower chair. I have to try it anyway. Once seated in it, it seems so small, almost child-like, because it's so low. Is this what it feels like to be disabled? I try to get up but find myself wedged in the chair. My arms feel too weak to lift me out. It's late and I've been working for hours. I begin to panic, and as I panic my breath gets shorter. As my breath gets shorter, I panic more. All I want is to get out of the bloody chair. I feel hot, so I try to unbutton my shirt, but I can't reach the last button.

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When the gardener finds Nigel the next morning, Nigel's skin is a brilliant inky blue. His mouth is open, as if in mid-breath. The gardener shakes his head and says in isiZulu: '*isiTsh' esihle kasidleli**.

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*The sudden death of a once handsome and useful person.

Chapter 12

A smartly dressed gentleman in a black suit and tie arrives to inform Nigel's daughter, Marilyn that the auction is on schedule and will be starting in half an hour. Marilyn, now thirty-four, works as a painting specialist for Saunders & Sons, one of Cape Town's leading fine-art auction houses

'Now don't you let Jonathan under-price those charcoal nudes,' instructs Damien, her boss. 'There's a great deal of interest in them, so remind him again to ride it, ride it all the way.'

'You're so old-fashioned, Damien. You really like those nudes, don't you? One day I will turn you toward the more subversive and abstract, then we'll at last be more like a contemporary Left Bank auction house,' smirks Marilyn.

'I'd better watch my back,' laughs Damien.

'You have no idea of my wicked plans for when you go on holiday,' chortles Marilyn.

'And remember, I'd kill to meet the artist if they're still alive, although preferably they're dead. Do your magic, get anyone connected to the family and watch closely for potential collectors.'

'Aye aye, sir!' Marilyn salutes.

She knows the stakes are high for the nudes. Damien and his father have kept six aside for their private collection, leaving fifteen up for auction today. They were tempted to keep the lot but knew they had to sell a substantial collection to get sufficient buyer and media interest. Their intention today is to find out if there is any more of the artist's work out there. Judging by the artworks – the style is so effortless, the technique so original – there is a very strong chance that the artist is or was highly

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prolific. The nudes have been likened to those of Matisse but with a post-modern edge, which is high praise indeed, and they appear to be of the same woman in various poses. It was a very lucky find; Damien wrangled a good deal buying this nude series after hearing that the Durban Country Club was up for sale. When he was asked to evaluate their art and saw the nudes among their collection, he instantly made an offer they couldn't refuse.

Marilyn collects her navy auction jacket from the cloakroom and nips into to the bathroom to freshen up. She speaks to herself out loud in the bathroom mirror: 'Red lipstick, check. Official looking navy jacket, spotless, check; hair up and off the face, check; modest smile, check.'

Marilyn heads up to the auction stage to sneak a look at the audience. She pulls aside a small section of the curtain. Holy moley! she thinks to herself, it's packed. The auctions attract the usual crowd of serious sellers, art collectors, agents and competitive auction houses, but today it's a very mixed bag. There are lots of new faces, including many people who are probably just simply curious, and a smatter of well-heeled socialites hoping to have their picture taken by the strong media contingent here today.

A striking woman in the second row in her sixties wearing black Jackie O sunglasses and a black velvet hat with lace detail catches Marilyn's eye. She's too over-the-top to be taken seriously, reckons Marilyn. She's certainly not the sort who regularly attends auctions, and she's definitely not a potential art buyer, and not nearly classy enough to be a socialite. Perhaps she's part of a ring, thinks Marilyn, who knows only too well the danger of bidders being aware of the identities of other bidders and colluding to form bidding rings. As anyone in the auction business knows, those in a ring can dictate the selling price of an item. By agreeing to bid only

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against outsiders, never against each other, they effectively weaken the competition – and the final selling price.

Rings are illegal, but that's never stopped anyone. Marilyn knows this because she was once part of a ring herself. Her previous job was at a dodgy auction house in Port Elizabeth, where she was expected to source people, whether housewives, teachers or estate agents, to play the dummy bid. Less reputable auction houses thrive on dummies and rings in the audience; they turn a good profit by colluding and stretching prices, because bids made by a dummy bidder in collusion with the auctioneer effectively deceive genuine bidders into paying more.

Marilyn was very fortunate to be headhunted by Damien's father, who immediately saw her potential – and the fact that she knew enough tricks of the trade to be useful on many levels. Marilyn's job description, 'painting specialist', is a clever cover for what she really does; who better to spot danger in an auction audience than someone who once recruited dummy bidders herself? To boost her credentials, Damien sent her to England to study at Sotheby's Institute of Art, where she did become a specialist. She studied great works of art first-hand in top museums, galleries, auction houses and private collections before graduating with an MA in Art Business, having done so exceptionally well that Sotheby's offered her an internship. But she chose to return to South Africa, not merely out of loyalty to the company or to be closer to her mother, but in the hope that one day she would finally track down her father.

'If only he could see me now, all proper and respectful,' Marilyn thinks wistfully, adjusting her jacket. Neither Alice nor Marilyn has seen Nigel since they parted ways at the Wild Coast Casino, after what her mother always referred to as 'that disastrous family holiday'.

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Sitting in the front row is Alice, Marilyn's mother, dressed reassuringly sedately in a dark green shift dress with strappy caramel sandals. Marilyn catches her eye and the two women exchange gentle knowing smiles. Alice is immensely proud of her daughter; the only thing that doesn't sit well is her feminist views on the history of the auction. This is something her book club friends tease her about.

'Historically,' Alice has told her friends, 'auctions were held to auction off women. In Babylon in 500 BC, bidding would start with the auctioneer choosing the most beautiful woman first and progressing down to the one he deemed to be the least attractive. It was illegal for men to sell their daughters – other than at an auction. Imagine Marilyn being auctioned off, or any of our daughters. What a dreadful, demeaning act.' And the book-club ladies all laughed at her for being so precious.

Alice decided not to tell her friends that despite that, she is rather fond of the auction process, the drama of it all and especially now that Marilyn is so closely a part of this world. Alice even half jokingly suggested to Marilyn that just once and for fun they do as eighteenth century English auctions did, where the auctioneer would start by lighting a candle and the highest bid at the time the candle burnt out would win the bid for whatever was on auction.

Marilyn stands next to the podium, helping Jonathan, the auctioneer, to keep a careful eye on the bidders. Marilyn now thinks the woman wearing the ridiculous hat could very well be a decoy to the real ring. She notices, amused, that the woman has massive breasts, and when she stands to greet a man in a grey pinstripe suit with a briefcase, Marilyn sees that she's impossibly tall and wide-hipped, but in a sexy sort of way. Definitely a decoy, assesses Marilyn. For now, though, she chooses to ignore the woman for a while and scan the crowd for anyone else suspicious. Marilyn thrives

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in this environment; she enjoys playing detective as much as she enjoys researching artists and having private access to view prized artworks.

Today, she reminds herself, it's her prime responsibility to uncover any detail, no matter how trivial, no matter how small, that could potentially lead to knowledge about the unknown artist of the charcoal nudes. The auction begins and bidding opens for a rare Satsuma vase, which attracts mild interest and is sold for only slightly higher than it's worth. The bidding moves on to a decorative Chinese porcelain tea set mounted with Parisian gilt-bronzed ormolu in the neo-classical style, a Franco-Flemish seigneurial tapestry, and a number of various other artworks – until, finally, it's the turn of the charcoal nudes.

The energy in the room immediately perks up. Everyone is attentive, with their auction catalogues open on the nudes. The woman in the hat leans forward, both hands on the back of the chair in front of her and takes off her dark glasses to enjoy a closer look at the artworks all now on display. She looks totally immersed in each artwork, as if each one individually speaks to her. Her interest borders on childlike – or perhaps, she is taken by the reminder of the beauty of a younger woman's body. Marilyn is fascinated by her response but then hears that familiar, authoritative cough from her boss reminding her to stick with the programme. She expertly scans the rest of the room and sees two gentlemen who stand out.

They're sitting apart from one another. One is trying too hard to look the part, in a white linen suit with his dark hair perfectly combed and heavily gelled, as if he's just stepped off an Italian fashion shoot. All he is missing is his Panama hat, Marilyn laughs to herself. He looks too arrogant to be taken seriously and, comically, it's his lower lip that really gives him away. It seems to have a life of its own, flapping open like a goldfish out of water gasping for air. Then there is the older gentleman who

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looks just a little too laid back, flicking idly through the catalogue as if he's utterly bored and has no need to be here. This behaviour piques Marilyn's interest and causes her to keep a closer eye on him.

Once the bidding starts, the media gears into action, photographing every aspect of the auction as if it were some high-profile court case. The moment the flashbulbs start going off, the woman in the hat pulls her lace veil over her face and, like a reluctant celebrity, dons her dark glasses. This makes Marilyn think that maybe she's not the decoy at all – but maybe she does have some tenuous connection to these artworks.

Marilyn takes a sip of water and looks more intently at the crowd. The older gentleman is now looking away. Seated next to him is a serious buyer known to Marilyn, who lifts his chin only slightly when he makes his bid. His name is Mr Goldman, and he does not like to draw any unnecessary attention to himself. Predictably, Mr Goldman opens with the first bid, followed, surprisingly, by the lady in the hat, who offers a timid royal wave at the auctioneer. The young man with the goldfish lips raises his catalogue, and then Mr Goldman lifts his chin. The elderly gentleman gets up to leave the room. Is he going to make a call, I wonder, and nod to my assistant, Fahied, to follow him and check. Fahied returns and communicates by tugging his right ear that the gentleman has only gone to the men's room. He could even possibly be the escort of the lady in the hat, muses Marilyn. Perhaps he's under duress, being in an unfamiliar setting, she thinks. He looks like he'd rather be watching a game of soccer on TV, or reading the newspaper in a coffee shop – anything but being here today.

The bidding continues for the first nude but the woman in the hat drops out. The young chap is clearly out of his league and he drops out after just two bids,

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allowing Mr Goldman to win the first round. If there's a series of similar objects up for auction the first round of bids is usually slow, as most buyers are nervous to bid until a general asking price is established.

'Nude figure number two now on auction. Starting bid opens at R220 000, ladies and gentlemen in the audience. What offers do we have for this original charcoal nude beauty?' croons Jonathan who, muses Marilyn, is as slick on the podium as he is in bed. She has totally gone off the man, who is now sleeping with the new intern.

Bidding reaches fever pitch and again Mr Goldman wins the round. After intense bidding all fifteen nudes are sold to Mr Goldman, who is now known to everyone in the room. He doesn't seem to care, thinks Marilyn, who intends to congratulate him and query his overwhelming interest in the artworks. In fact, she thinks, he looks physically pleased to have purchased the entire series. Damien is smiling as he shakes Mr Goldman's hand. The artworks fetched close to R4 million.

With the auction finally over, Marilyn knows her job is only just beginning. As she descends from the auction stage, the woman in the hat approaches her. Marilyn fobs her off as she knows now for certain this woman is not the person she needs to speak to, and there is suddenly someone talking to Mr Goldman that Marilyn needs to meet, and quick. But unfortunately for Marilyn, the woman is relentless and grabs her arm.

'Listen doll, we need to talk.'

Marilyn pulls away from the woman's firm grip and knows that if she was not wearing a navy Saunders & Sons jacket, standing in the smart Saunders & Sons auction room, she would pull this tricky woman to one side and very discreetly and

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expertly take her thumb and push it back hard. It's an extremely painful move, which immediately immobilises anyone no matter how big, how tall, how tough.

But Marilyn is taken aback by what the woman says. 'Would you like to see more nudes?' she repeats. 'I have about forty in my spare room at home.'

Half an hour later, Marilyn and the woman are sitting on a faded pink sofa in a damp, dark flat in Overport. Marilyn is staring at the new charcoal nudes. The style is even looser and more evocative than those sold just over an hour ago. They're all signed, 'Lily'.

'Where did you get these?' Marilyn asks, eyes wide with excitement.

'They're mine, I'm Lily.'

Marilyn looks stunned.

'Wow, they're really good, you saw how much they sold for at the auction. This is incredible. How wonderful to meet you!' and Marilyn pumps her hand, smiling broadly as if they've just met.

'And how did fifteen of your drawings land up on the walls of the Durban Country Club?'

'The former chairman was a client,' smiles Lily.

'How lucky to have a patron of the arts,' says Marilyn, not completely convinced.

'I have many patrons, there are hundreds of these pictures all around the country. I'm quite famous!' Lily beams, offering Marilyn a brandy and Coke.

'We need to celebrate, doll. Doubles!' shouts Lily. She's all breasts and legs, thinks Marilyn as she heads for the kitchen.

As Lily pours the drinks Marilyn, vastly pleased, marvels at the nudes. Then she notices a collage of dubious photographs in a block mount on the wall, reflecting

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very similar – in fact some identical – poses as the artworks she's been marvelling over. Marilyn shouts out to Lily in the kitchen.

'Are all these self-portraits from your photographs?'

'Yes, something like that,' she shouts back, in an amiable, sincere voice.

Marilyn nods a trifle dubiously and gets up and walks towards Lily, who is cracking ice in the kitchen sink.

'May I use your bathroom, please?' asks Marilyn, leaning in the doorway.

'Sure, doll, it's straight down the passage, first door to your left.'

Damien is going to be thrilled, thinks Marilyn, who can't wait to see the expression on his face. So much for better the price if the artist is dead; she's alive and kicking and very probably a strumpet at that.

A gaudy red Chinese gown hangs behind the bathroom door. Is that a drawing stuck on the back of the bathroom door, Marilyn wonders, hoping to discover something new, perhaps some early pencil sketches that could be worth something. She brushes aside the gown for a better look but they are rather disappointing crude abstract paintings of two nude women dancing. I wonder who did these, ponders Marilyn. She sits down on the loo and looks at the pile of books on the floor. They're mainly on astrology, numerology and self-realisation, she notices, picking up the annoying bestseller, *Think & Grow Rich,* and flipping through it.

Coming out of the bathroom, Marilyn hears Lily singing along to Tina Turner in the lounge. Marilyn can't resist having a quick sneaky peak at Lily's bedroom. She walks into the bedroom and her eyes fall upon the bedroom paraphernalia, red and pink feather boas, masses of candles in all sizes, and scent bottles on tables, on the floor and on bookshelves. Marilyn stifles a laugh when she looks up and sees the giant mirror on the ceiling. Above Lily's bed is a magnificent portrait of two boys. As she

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moves closer to inspect it, she notes with interest the boys are twins. They look sullen but defiant. The technique of the painting, vastly different from that of the nudes, is as exquisite. Marilyn's mind races with the endless possibilities of promoting a new artist. She moves closer to inspect the portrait and gets lost in the vibrant use of colour. Her heart skips a beat as she reads the artist's name: Nigel. What an odd coincidence, she thinks, and she fobs away the feelings rising up for her absent father.

'Snooping, are we?' asks Lily, standing in the bedroom doorway. Marilyn gets a start.

'Oh I'm sorry,' Marilyn blushes, 'there was just such a wonderful scent in this room,' and she laughs a nervous laugh, 'I couldn't resist, and then this picture...'

'Neroli oil mixed with orange blossom, the same scent in the bathroom,' snips Lily curtly, hands on hips, lips pursed and jaw tight. 'You could have just asked!' and she ushers Marilyn very quickly out her bedroom.

'Lily, I am sorry. Okay I confess I'm a bit of a snoop when it comes to people's homes, I love to see what artwork they have in their bedrooms, it always says so much of the person, and clearly you're a mother who dearly loves her boys,' she finds herself squirm as she says this. 'It's not a bad painting actually,' Marilyn would like to praise, but holds her tongue in case Lily is willing to sell. 'Is the artist perhaps a friend of yours?'

'I don't want to talk about it.' She fends off any further enquiry with a firm wave of a hand, but then carries on: 'Their father took them to Australia and I haven't seen them since.'

'Well just think, if you sell some of your paintings you could hop on a plane tomorrow!'

'You reckon?' Lily's voice raises slightly.

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'And the artist, Nigel, please tell me more about him,' Marilyn goes on.

'Listen, doll, don't push me!' Lily becomes aggressive again. Her manner is alarming, but Marilyn can identify with loss of family and the anger that journeys with it, so she lets it lie.

'I'm sorry, I am terribly pushy sometimes. It's just my job,' Marilyn attempts to soothe her with that old carrot.

'Fine. Don't ever ask me about that painting or mention my boys again.'

Lily offers Marilyn her third brandy and Coke. Politely Marilyn accepts, knowing she's only just started. It's an awful brandy, cheap and nasty, and it reminds Marilyn of her cheap and nasty days working in Port Elizabeth. Marilyn is mystified about the painting hanging above Lily's bed – if it brings her so much pain, how can she bear to look at it? Still, after a few drinks Lily and Marilyn are what Lily calls 'lagging away' like old mates, especially after Marilyn informs her they would certainly be very interested in buying the bulk of her paintings.

'Yah, but at what price, doll? I've been to the auction, I know what they're really worth, to think I was selling them for R700 a pop back when Nigel...'

'Nigel? You mean the same artist who did the painting in your bedroom, a friend of yours?'

'Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?'

'Every day Lily, every day.'

Lily laughs.

'Lily, you do realise that if the nudes aren't your work you'll make more money from them? A dead artist fetches more money than a living one.'

Lily puts down her drink and is quiet for a while:

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'You saying I can make more money if I tell you someone else did these pictures and technically, because I own them, they're mine, and I can get all the lovely money to move to Australia to be with my boys?' Her face lights up at the prospect.

'Exactly.' Marilyn doesn't remind her about next of kin or that it has to be proved the artist is dead.

'You playing me?'

'I'm fucking serious, Lily.'

'Shit, man, that's the best news I've heard in my whole life. And I have a surprise for you. I've more to show you, will you tell me what they're worth?' And she leaps up to hurriedly fetch them, without waiting for me to answer.

Marilyn follows her down the passageway and a chill runs through her body as she asks:

'You say the artist is dead? What happened to him?'

'I don't know if he really is, but I imagine so,' she says and turns around to stops in the passageway. 'One day he just disappeared, he left all his stuff, his paintings, everything.'

'How long ago did you see him?'

'Geez I don't know, I'm so bad with dates. I can check my diary, but hey you go sit down and enjoy your drink and I'll bring the pictures in one by one just like you guys do at the auction?'

'Sure,' Marilyn agrees as she hasn't had lunch yet, and after her fifth double brandy and Coke, she is starting to feel quite drunk.

'Wait there,' says Lily, 'I'm coming...'

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She returns with a giant canvas covered with an old sheet and places it on the sofa and then disappears to collect more pieces until the entire lounge is littered with artwork, all covered with her sheets and old blankets. Marilyn stares at one canvas in particular; it's barely covered with a gown in a fabric that looks unnervingly familiar. The fabric is red with thin blue and white piano stripes. It is so familiar to her that momentarily she is less interested in what lies beneath.

'Ta-da!' says Lily removing the gown and flinging it dramatically onto the floor, before proceeding to remove every blanket, sheet and cloth from the other artworks.

'Okay, doll, what do you think?'

And now Marilyn is so stunned by the array of mesmerising artworks around her she can't even speak. She instantly knows they are beautiful beyond measure, absolutely startling in their original style. They are intimate, moving portraits in charcoal on large canvases depicting people in moments of terrible anguish, old women and children being forced onto lorries, one portrait is a silent portrayal of a row of cafes with signs on the doors that say they're all closed, and all the shops are boarded up. Lily mumbles on but Marilyn is only half listening. All Marilyn hears is a smattering of words:

'...Simon's Town evictions, he was there...'

Her hand to her chin, Marilyn, takes in the striking landscapes of empty beaches; she marvels at the sensitive moods depicted, the low lying thick set storm clouds gathering above a flat grey ocean with thin shafts of light from the sky and beautiful pools of light illuminating the ocean. The sea looks mythical with this light, thinks Marilyn, it looks like a transporter of dreams and it's this spiritual intimacy to

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this oceanic expanse which truly extends the reach of his work, like the masters, marvels Marilyn, he has a spiritual understanding of light.

Marilyn admires a portrait of a woman titled *The Admiral's wife*. There's a particularly poignant portrayal of what looks like a bag lady with a black plastic bag on her head, titled *Maggie*. And yes, they're all dated, 1967, and they're all signed. Marilyn is hypnotised by the familiar elegant cursive handwriting of the signature in full.

'So what do you think, doll?' Lily asks once more, her voice growing irritable.

Despite it still being daylight, the garish cherry velvet curtains are drawn and this makes Marilyn feel hot and stuffy. The windows must be closed, she thinks. As she reaches for the curtain to let in some light, she has to steady herself, as she feels the need to throw up. She sits down and without saying a word reaches out to touch her father's TV gown.

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